MINI MUGHALS

Bahadur Shah I
Jahandar Shah
Farrakh-Siyyar
Rafi-ud-Darjat
Rafi-ud-Daula
Muhammad Shah

DONATED IN THE MEMORY OF
S. JOGINDER SINGH
42-G-U SECT.-3
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MINI MUGHALS

MUNI LAL

DONATED IN THE MEMORY OF
S. JOGINDER SINGH
42 - B/10 SECT. -3
ROHINI NEW DELHI

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PREFACE

THE might and magnificence of the Mughals ended with the passing away of Alamgir in 1707. His successors trod the hills and plains of Hindustan for another century and a half, but there was left neither dignity in their gait nor the aura of divinity over their heads. All of them were less than mediocrities. Their sole occupation was to wear the crown and sit on the throne at least once a day. By and large, they remained helpless spectators of the fast-developing drama of decadence that began with the launching of religious and military crusades by Aurangzeb.

None of the six emperors covered in this volume possessed either the wisdom or the wise counsellors to halt the slide downwards. The result was infinite confusion and corruption that could not but help the foes within and comfort the better-armed adventurists from across the seas. It was a miracle that the Empire, or what remained of it, stood partly intact for as long as it did after Muhammad ShahÆs defeat at the hands of Nadir Shah at Karnal in 1739. Perhaps the memories of the splendorous days of the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir and Shah Jahan, as also of the high-pitched, purposive puritanism of Alamgir, helped generate, to some extent, the will to resist and survive. The realities could not, however, be kept at bay for long.

With the passing away of Muhammad Shah in 1748, the Empire broke up into independent or semi-independent parts. The Mughal glow flickered for another one hundred years before the flame went out finally in 1857. The end of Mughal rule in India was a touching climax to a period of history unusually rich in eye-catching achievements in war and in peace. It may perhaps be not wrong to suggest that the liberalism of Akbar had in it the seeds of the modern-day concept of secularism. His was a daring experiment, against the tide of time, that won him a place among the all-time great monarchs of the world. Besides making revolutionary innovations in the fields of administration, financial management and social welfare, the Mughals embellished India with breath-taking creations in art and architecture. They made India their

home, and thus played a significant role in the evolution of a composite culture transcending the barriers of race, religion and narrow traditions. We salute them.

This is the seventh work in the series aimed at portraying the personalities of the Mughal Emperors. The six monarchs under focus in this book covered a period of forty-one years. For the study of good and bad in their characters, it is needless to analyse minutely each of them separately. They were all products of the ever-thickening adversity, intrigue, opportunism and factionalism that stalked the land. The circumstances were against them, and it was therefore not surprising that only two of them—Bahadur Shah I and Muhammad Shah—came to the end of their journeys in the natural way. The other four—Jahandar Shah, Farrakh-Siyyar, Rafi-ud-Darjat and Rafi-ud-Daula—were done to death by those who raised them to the throne for their own material interests. The times were rough, and the devil was the playmate of all those in authority.

The period of instability could not but spawn immorality in all its ugly forms. The rulers and the ruled concentrated on the short-term objective of making the maximum hay while the sun shone. God was forgotten for the time, and so were the corollaries of God-consciousness. Acquisition of wealth took the form of a religion. The means, right or wrong, were considered irrelevant to the new set of values. The nobility, headed first by Asad Khan and his son Zulfiqar Khan and then by the Syed brothers, Hassan Ali Khan and Hussain Ali Khan, showed the way to this cult of the supremacy of the self. Later, Nizam-ul-Mulk, Qamar-ud-Din Khan and Khan-i-Dauran became the symbols of the idle rich wielding infinite authority. Their creed was to do nothing except revel in the pleasures of the senses. The dreary vacuum of neglect of duty at all levels helped Nadir Shah to disprove the general belief that the Mughal arms were invincible. The swivel gun proved, of course, useful to the Persian predator, but the more useful weapon in his armoury was the faithlessness of the Hindustani commanders. The latter were, one and all, pictures of protest against the concept of loyalty. On the day of his departure from Delhi, Nadir Shah gave Muhammad Shah a lecture on the sins of his counsellors. "They are all half-apes, a herd of selfish human beings whose intellect is of the age of bronze", he told the Emperor. Nadir's perception was not off the mark. He put his finger right on the weakest spot in the imperial court. Though his heart was callous, his sights were clear. He knew exactly the reason of his victory against vastly superior numbers. The effete Muhammad Shah had no chance against him.

The story in this book is primarily one of intrigue, treachery, disloyalty and lechery. These are depressing subjects, but nonetheless interesting in that they reveal the depths of degeneration to which the lust for lucre could lead those in power. For one hundred and seventy years the Mughals rose steadily to dizzy heights by many a virtue of the soul and the sword. For the next century and a half they declined, stage by stage, to a point of hopelessness by sins of uncontrolled greed and lust. This panorama of the rise and fall of a robust ruling dynasty is a gripping study for all those interested in man, his environs and God. The writing of this book gave me some pain, some doubts and fears, and an acute awareness of the role of Providence in the affairs of man. Nevertheless, I enjoyed the exercise. Tragedy depresses; it also uplifts.

Another volume in this series is on the card. That will bring the story to the deportation and death of the last Mughal Emperor. Bahadur Shah Zaffar was the proverbial swan that faded away in the melody of his own soulful songs. With his passing away came to an end the House of Amir Timur.

It gives me much pleasure to record my gratitude to all those friends and well-wishers who assisted me, in one way or another, in the preparation and editing of this work. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the assistance received from my son, Akash, and the never-say-no staffs of the Nehru Memorial and the India International Centre Libraries in Delhi. Also I am obliged to the Victoria Memorial Hall, Calcutta, for providing copies of the portraits reproduced in this book.

MUNI LAL

To
SITA
My daughter in spirit and in law

When years advance, a daughter's kind
eye beams infinite comfort.

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CHRONOLOGY

1643: October 4, birth of Muhammad Mu'azzam (later Bahadur Shah I) at Burhanpur. He was the second child of Aurangzeb and Nawab Bai.

1650: April 10, circumcision ceremony of Muhammad Mu'azzam.

1656: May 30, death of Mu'azzam's pet dog, Daulat.

1658: June 8, Prince Mu'azzam given a *mansab* of ten thousand.

1660: March 12, wedding of Shah Alam with Nizam Bai, daughter of Fatehyawar Jang of Hyderabad.

1663: Prince Mu'azzam appointed Viceroy of the Deccan with a *mansab* of twenty thousand. He was then twenty-year old.

1664: December 16, birth of Azim-ush-Shan, son of Bahadur Shah and Amrita Bai, daughter of Raja Roop Singh Rathor.

1673: Shah Alam marries Aziz-un-Nissa Khanum at Attock.

Prince Mu'azzam transferred from the Deccan; appointed Viceroy of Punjab, Kabul and Sind.

1676: Prince Mu'azzam received the title Shah Alam for his military successes in the North-west.

1678: Shah Alam reposted as Viceroy to the Deccan for the second time.

1679: Birth of Jahan Shah, fourth and youngest son of Shah Alam.

1687: Shah Alam arrested, and lodged as prisoner in the fort of Daultabad.

1691: Death of Chattar Bai, wife of Shah Alam in Agra.

1692: Death in Delhi of Nizam Bai, wife of Shah Alam. She was the mother of Jahandar Shah.

1695: Shah Alam released from the fort at Daultabad.

1701: Death of Nur-un-Nissa Begum, wife of Shah Alam in Kabul.

1707: May, Shah Alam leaves Jamrud to contest the throne against his brothers.

June 28, entry of Shah Alam into the throne room at Agra with traditional fanfare.

July 21, Asad Khan and his son, Zulfiqar Khan, present themselves at the court of Bahadur Shah.

1708: Bahadur Shah leads an expedition to Amber (Jaipur).

February 27, Maharaja Ajit Singh of Marwar, presents himself to Bahadur Shah at the imperial camp.

May 17, Bahadur Shah crosses the Narbada in a bid to meet the challenge held out by Kam Baksh.

November, death of Guru Gobind Singh at Nader on the bank of the river Godavri.

1709: January 13, Bahadur Shah defeats Kam Baksh in a battle near Hyderabad.

February 1, Bahadur Shah leaves Aurangabad for Delhi.

1710: March 15, Bahadur Shah reaches Delhi after defeating Kam Baksh in the south.

May 16, Wazir Khan, Governor of Sirhind, killed by the Sikh chief, Banda Bahadur.

June 21, Maharajas Jai Singh and Ajit Singh present themselves at the Mughal court.

September 7, death of Rabi Begum, daughter of Jahandar Shah.

October 22, Bahadur Shah at Sonepat at head of a huge army to fight Banda Bahadur

November 13, Bahadur Shah storms into Thanesar.

December 4, Sikh forces routed by imperial army.

1711: February 28, Death of Munim Khan.

August 11, Bahadur Shah reaches the precincts of Lahore.

1712: Middle of January, Bahadur Shah suffers a paralytic stroke.

February 27, death of Bahadur Shah in camp near Lahore.

March 15, 16, fierce battle near Lahore between Azim-ush-Shan and the joint forces of Jahandar Shah, Rafi-ush-Shan and Jahan Shah. Azim-ush-Shan defeated and drowned in the river Ravi.

March 17, defeat and death of Azim-ush-Shan.

Death of Jahan Shah in battle against Muiz-ud-Din.

March 26, Jahan Shah killed in battle against Jahandar Shah.

March 29, Rafi-ush-Shan killed in battle against Jahandar Shah.

Muiz-ud-Din ascends the throne in the title Alamgir II.

May 1, Jahandar Shah leaves Lahore for Agra following victory in the war of succession.

May 13, Bahadur Shah buried at Mehroli, near Delhi.

June 2, Jahandar Shah reaches Delhi following victory near Lahore.

November 12, Farrakh-Siyyar crosses the Ganga to wage war against Jahandar Shah.

December 29, Jahandar Shah's army reaches Agra to meet the challenge of Farrakh-Syyar.

1713: January 12, Farrakh-Siyyar's victory over Jahandar Shah in a battle near Agra.

January 19, Jahandar Shah and Lal Kanwar reach outskirts of Delhi following defeat at the hands of Farrkah-Siyyar.

January 22, Farrakh-Siyyar leaves Agra for Delhi following his victory over Jahandar Shah.

February 11, Jahandar Shah strangled to death.

February 12, Farrakh-Siyyar enters Delhi in state.

February 14, Jahandar Shah buried inside the Humayun tomb complex.

1714: April 8, first ever public execution of a woman in Mughal history.

1715: December, Farrakh-Siyyar marries a daughter of Maharaja Ajit Singh of Marwar.

December 13, capture of Banda Bahadur.

1716: June 15, death of Asad Khan.

1718: October, Syed Hussain Ali leaves Aurangabad for Delhi.

1719: February 19, Syed Hussain Ali pitches his tents four miles from Delhi.

February 28, Rafi-ud-Darjat proclaimed Emperor.

February 28, Rafi-ud-Darjat ascends the throne.

April 19, revolt in Agra, Niku-Siyyar declared Emperor.

April 27, Farrakh-Siyyar done to death.

June 4, Rafi-ud-Darjat deposed on grounds of health.

June 6, Rafi-ud-Daula ascends the throne.

June 11, death of Rafi-ud-Darjat.

August 12, collapse of revolt by Niku-Siyyar.

September 18, death of Rafi-ud-Daula.

1720: May 11, Girdhar Bahadur vacates the fort of Allahabad.

May 20, Nizam-ul-Mulk captures the fort of Asirgarh.

August 9, defeat of Syed Alim Ali at the hands of Nizam-ul-Mulk in Deccan.

September 11, Muhammad Shah moves out of Agra for the Deccan.

He took the longer route via Ajmer.

October 8, Syed Hussain Ali killed.

November 13, defeat of Abdullah Khan in the battle of Hastanapur.

November 22, Muhammad Shah enters Delhi after victory over Abdullah Khan.

1721: January 15, death of Muhammad Amin Khan.

November, Muhammad Shah's marriage with Malka-i-Zamani, daughter of Farrakh-Siyyar.

1722: February 22, Nizam-ul-Mulk appointed Vizir-i-Saltanat.

1723: March 11, death of Niku-Siyyar, grandson of Aurangzeb.

December 23, Nizam-ul-Mulk crosses the Jamuna after relinquishing the post of Vizir.

1724: July, Nizam-ul-Mulk reaches Aurangabad.

October 11, defeat of Mubriz Khan at the hands of Nizam-ul-Mulk.

1725: January 15, the fort of Hyderabad surrenders to Nizam-ul-Mulk.

April 11, Sarbland Khan leaves Delhi as commander-in-chief of an army to bring peace to Gujarat.

1727: Birth of Ahmad Shah, son of Muhammad Shah and Malika-i-Zamani.

1730: July, suppression of the rising of the Bohra community in Gujarat under Shaikh Abdullah.

July, appointment of Raja Abhey Singh of Marwar as Governor of Gujarat.

October 20, Sarbland Khan surrenders Ahmedabad to Raja Abhey Singh.

November 7, Raja Abhey Singh takes charge of the post of Governor of Gujarat.

1731: April 24, The Nizam-Bangesh accord reached at Akbarabad.

December 14, death of Raja Chttarsal of Bundelkhand at Patna.

1732: June, death of Khidmatqar Khan in Delhi.

1734: Raja Jai Singh appointed Governor of Malwa.

1735: April 17, Death of Anup Bai, wife of Jahandar Shah and mother of Alamgir II.

1736: February 26, Nadir Quli Shah becomes Shah of Persia.

1737: April 9, Balaji Baji Rao plants his flag at Kalkaji, six miles from Delhi.

April 27, Nizam-ul-Mulk leaves Burhanpur for Delhi.

July 12, Nizam-ul-Mulk reaches Delhi.

1738: Death in prison of Izzad Din, second son of Jahandar Shah.

March 12, fall of the fort of Qandhar to Nadir Shah.

June 19, Kabul surrenders to Nadir Shah.

July 3, Nadir writes a letter to Muhammad Shah.

September 7, Nadir orders general massacre at Jalalabad.

November 3, Mirza Raza Quli, eldest son of Nadir Shah, crowned Deputy-Emperor of Persia.

November 6, Nadir Shah leaves Jalalabad for Peshawar.

November 15, Nadir Shah breaks through the defences of Khyber Pass.

December 12, Nadir leaves Peshawar for Lahore.

1739: January 8, Nadir Shah crosses the river Chenab.

January 10-11, Nadir Shah surprises Lahore into surrender.

January 26, Nadir Shah marches out of Lahore for Delhi.

January 27, Muhammad Shah joins the imperial army at Panipat.

February 13, battle of Karnal, Mughal army routed by Nadir Shah.

February 15, death of Khan-i-Dauran.

February 15, Muhammad Shah comes to dine with Nadir Shah in the latter's camp.

February 24, Muhammad Shah detained at Persian camp.

March 1, Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah leave Karnal for Delhi.

March 7, Nadir Shah pitches his tents in Shalimar Garden, near Delhi.

March 9, banquet held by Muhammad Shah in honour of Nadir Shah.

March 11, General massacre in Delhi.

March 26, marriage of Prince Nasrullah Khan, son of Nadir Shah, with Jahan Naz, daughter of Prince Dewar Baksh.

May 1, Nadir Shah holds farewell Darbar in Delhi.

May 5, Nadir Shah leaves Delhi.

1744: December 12, death in Delhi of the "blind Prince" Azz-ud-Din, son of Jahandar Shah.

1746: January 30, death of Muhammad Ibrahim.

1747: June 2, death of Nadir Shah; stabbed by a Persian soldier.

1748: April 26, death of Muhammad Shah.

Bahadur Shah I

Chapter 1

BLACK MOLE ON THE PALM

IT is not a lip or eye that makes a woman beautiful, but the joint force and pull of all parts together. Anuradha Bai, daughter of Raja Raju Maharaj.of the tiny state of Rajouri in Kashmir, was, from all accounts, a lovely lass of seventeen when Prince Aurangzeb married Dilraz Banu Begum at Agra in May, 1637. Though her proportions erred in balance and symmetry, she was as sweet as spring and attracted much notice in Shah Jahan's harem.

Noblemen and their wives and daughters from all parts of the Empire had gathered in Agra for the wedding. Anuradha was a guest of the fifty-three-year old Phul Begum (*nee* Rattan Bai) whom Prince Salim took into his harem in 1584. She was a daughter of Raja Basu, ruler of the hill state of Nurpur near Kangra. One of her sisters was married to the then chief of Rajouri.

Anuradha needed no blossoms to heighten her beauty. Modesty and coyness were the ornaments she wore with telling effect. A bashful face is of all spectacles the most attractive. She was not beautiful in all parts, but the sum total of her looks was enchanting. A handsome, well-composed damsel, she was very good company and of a very ready, smooth wit. Presumably, she had not tasted love yet, but perhaps in the inner recesses of her heart she yearned to love. Phul Begum, herself a rare vintage charmer in youth, was aware of her guest's physical and intellectual virtues; she also knew the hazards and opportunities that lay in the path of beauty. For the present, however, her hopes and fears remained unexpressed. Silent prayer was the means she chose to wish Anuradha well. Some thoughts saddened her, others soothed her agitation. She never shared them with any one.

The wedding ceremonies came to an end on 8 May. The royal guests began to leave the same week. Heavy rain in the hills forced Anuradha

to delay her departure till the monsoon was over. The fate has more than one way to achieve its purposes.

Aurangzeb and Dilraz Begum made preparations to leave for the Deccan* after the rainy season. With the approval of the Emperor, he invited *Amma-Dadi* Phul Begum to accompany him. Guided perhaps by the unseen hand of destiny, Anuradha expressed a wish to "have a look at the famed fortresses of the south". Permission for her travel was hurriedly sought from her father, and she became a part of the Viceroy's entourage when he marched out for Burhanpur in mid-September. With her eyes fixed heavenward, the ageing Phul Begum saw in this sequence of events a divine purpose as clearly as birds do their trackless way.

The three-month march was eventless except for some hunting expeditions in which "the Viceroy showed himself to be an unfaltering marksman and the princess a gracious hostess". A Persian by descent, Dilraz Banu** was, according to contemporary historians, a curious blend of refined manners, vanity, self-love, learning, and loyalty to her husband. She was well-read in history and Persian literature. Shaikh Saadi, she acknowledged, was her preceptor. It was in obedience to the advice contained in one of his verses that she quickly identified herself with the puritanism of Aurangzeb. "If you want to be loved, love and be lovable", wrote the Shaikh. Dilraz was often heard to hum this verse in the quiet elegance of her apartment.

At Burhanpur, Phul Begum and her ward were allotted "a small but dainty cottage" close to the royal palace. Seven slave-girls and two senior governesses were deputed to look after their daily requirements. Food was sent to them five times a day from the palace kitchen. A team of eunuchs, and another of *Aahidis*, was posted at the house as the usual double-security screen. The two were invited to the royal palace for family get-togethers on every Friday, as also on other festive occasions. Aurangzeb and Dilraz Begum visited them invariably on full-moon nights, and "spent with them several *gharis* talking about Kashmir, Kangra and other subjects of common interest". Arrangements were also made for Anuradha to "fulfil her desire to take a peep into the history of Deccan".

Days, weeks and months slipped by in almost monotonous routine till

* Following his military success in Bundelkhand, Aurangzeb was appointed in 1636 to his first term of Viceroyalty in the Deccan. In the next eight years, he visited Agra only four times.

** Dilraz Banu Begum was a daughter of Shahnawaz Khan, member of the Persian royal house of Safvis. He migrated to Hindustan in the reign of Jahangir.

in the twilight of a winter evening (1639) a pale-faced Aurangzeb professed love for Anuradha, and he sought permission to marry her. Phul Begum's reaction was a compound of feigned surprise, happiness, helplessness and resignation to the will of God. She suggested prior consent of the Emperor, as also of Raja Raju, but Aurangzeb, blown as he was on the wings of an emotional tempest, waxed impatient and wanted a date to be fixed before the advent of the next full moon. Phul Begum, who bore her fifty-five birthdays proudly on her unbent back, gave her approval subject to the consent of Anuradha — a condition rooted more in form than in any hesitation on her part. Aurangzeb left without venturing a request to meet the maiden that dominated his thoughts. He was fidgety and restless. Neither heaven nor earth was at peace with him that night. Before the sun arose the next day, the Chamberlain came to the Begum's house for a formal reply. She wrote back:

> "Her silence is more eloquent than words. A date after the ninth of this month may be fixed. May the great Allah bless this union. The two Houses are entering what may turn out to be a glorious chapter in their history. We bow our heads in gratitude and submission to the will of the Lord".

Aurangzeb was a self-willed individual. Where his heart lay there lay his brain too. He sent letters to Agra and Rajouri, giving reasons for his decision and seeking blessings of the two Houses. He informed his father, as also Raja Raju, that a simple wedding would take place on 26 December in accordance with Islamic rites. In his communication to Shah Jahan, he wrote:

Interests of the Empire rather than compulsions of emotional upsurge induced me to ask for the hand of the daughter of Raja Raju. *Mohtrimma* Begum Sahiba gave her approval for the alliance. In her great innate wisdom, she felt that the union would help strengthen the kingdom in the north. She is also of the view that Anuradha will bring additional good fortune to the affairs of state. A bright mole in the middle of her left palm is, according to astrologers, a sign of good luck. They consider her eminently suited for entry into the Mughal harem.

Arrangements have been made, in concert with the *Shaikh-ul-Ummat*, to perform the wedding ritual strictly in accordance with Mughal tradition. The name proposed to be given her is Rahmat-un-Nissa.

Normally, I should have waited for Your Majesty's formal approval before taking a final decision. Uncertainty hangs over the affairs of state

in the Deccan. The Maharattas on the one hand and the Sultanates on the other are bent upon creating trouble for our forces and our representatives everywhere. I may have to leave Burhanpur early next year for a fairly long stretch of time. A delay in the performance of *nikah* was not considered either advisable or propitious.

I would, therefore, beg Your Majesty to condone haste and to convey us your blessings and good wishes. This humble submission is made with the approval and at the instance of the most revered Begum Sahiba.

Shah Jahan had no option but to express happiness at the news. That Dilraz Begum had not borne a male child in the last two years was an additional reason for the Emperor to bless the wedding with fairly expensive gifts for his son and daughter-in-law. He suggested that at the birth of the first male child, Rahmat-un-Nissa should bear the title Nawab Bai.

The young heart of Anuradha went pit-a-pat when the Begum conveyed to her the proposal made by Aurangzeb. Though the development did not come to her as a total surprise, there was fog in her throat and mist in her face as she fumbled for words to say what she did not have the courage to say. In the great right of being young and beautiful, Anuradha hung her head down for a few slow-moving moments before leaving for the quiet privacy of her own room on the first floor. There she lay on her bed trying to reconstruct the events of the last two years into a coherent whole. She felt convinced the Prince was in love with her from the moment he first met her in the camp on way to Burhanpur. Love and a cough, she mused, could not be hidden. The only surprise to her was that for twenty-three months he was able to keep his emotions on the leash. "He loved like a madman, never like a fool", she told the Begum Sahiba many years later at Agra. Years taught her that it required far more genius to make love than to command armies.

Anuradha did not come out of her room the whole evening. The Begum let her gloat in her own hopes and fears. When the two met in the morning, neither referred to what was uppermost in her thoughts. There are many ways of saying a yes; the one followed by Anuradha was perhaps the easiest

Beauty, it is said, is exempt from fear. That was perhaps not the case with beautiful women entering the harem of a Mughal prince. On 26 December 1639, when Rahmat-un-Nissa stepped forth to welcome Aurangzeb in her apartment, the first thing she did was to take out from her pocket and hand it over to him a piece of paper on which were

scribbled in Persian the words: "Save me from fear and defeat. I seek no other treasures. In return, I hold out to you all that I possess". Aurangzeb, a picture of faith and dignity, read the transcription, stood motionless for a couple of *lamhas*, and replied: "Trust conquers fear, and courage defeat. Your destiny is in your own hands." Anuradha bowed her head in agreement—a silent acceptance of the duties that befell on her shoulders.

The gifts that Aurangzeb brought for her included a miniature copy of the holy book and a diamond-studded tiara which originally belonged to Mumtaz Mahal. Rahmat, wiser than her years, placed the tiara respectfully on a table at hand and raised the Quran to her head. This studied act of identification with her husband's priorities showed that one thing was lent to men and women in common—dissimulation! She turned and looked at the pages of the sacred book with the seriousness of a connoisseur of fine arts and the surrender of a faithful. Aurangzeb was charmed by this impromptu act of submission. In return, he swore eternal love, took her by the hand, and escorted her to the ante-room where the senior ladies of the royal family, as also of the nobility, were waiting to greet them. The gifts presented to Rahmat-un-Nissa were eye-catching. The one that attracted the most attention was a set of twenty-one Persian rubies by Phul Begum. The people retired to their private apartment after the mid-night prayers.

The first child of this marriage, a son, was born in camp near Muttra on 19 December, 1640. The name given to him was Muhammad Sultan. Three years later, on 4 October 1643, was born Muhammad Mu'azzam (later Bahadur Shah I) at Burhanpur. The third and last child of Rahmat-un-Nissa, a daughter (Badr-un-Nissa) was born on 7 November 1647. She died in April 1670, at the young age of twenty-three.

Being the mother of the two senior-most sons in the family, Rahmat-un-Nissa (title Nawab Bai) became involved in court intrigues and jealousies early in life. Dilraz Begum was not blessed with a son till 1653 — a circumstance that could not but give Nawab Bai a high rating in the harem. The uncertainties of succession, together with Aurangzeb's infatuation with at least three other women—Aurangabadi Mahal, Udaipuri Mahal and Zainabadi—sat heavily on the heart of ambitious Nawab Bai. The strain showed itself on her face, in her mien and general outlook. Her beauty declined, and she, like a summer flower, lost her bloom quickly. Aurangzeb's love for her stopped ticking. Dismayed and disillusioned, she died in Delhi in 1691 a very lonely and distressed woman. Her two sons were imprisoned for alleged disobedience and disloyalty. Muhammad Sultan died in detention in 1671. Muhammad Mu'azzam lived,

however, to ascend the peacock throne in the title of Bahadur Shah I. Nawab Bai achieved after death what she yearned to attain in life. The black mole on the palm of her left hand was not in vain. Mu'azzam too was born with that badge of luck.

Beauty, not lineage, was Nawab Bai's insignia of honour. This reality was repulsive to the orthodox conservatives. The court historians, in particular Danishmand Khan, author of *Bahadur Shahnama*, put forth an unconvincing story to underline her high descent. According to him, she was the daughter of Syed Shah Mir—a lineal descendant of the saint, Abdul Qadir Jilani—whom the ruler of Rajouri gave in marriage his daughter out of gratitude for "showing him the way to score victories in war and in peace". Two children, a son and a daughter, were born of this marriage. Shah Mir, it is said, went for pilgrimage to Mecca, and never returned. The children, along with their mother, returned to Rajouri, and they were, thereafter, taken care of by their grandfather. According to Danishmand Khan, Aurangzeb sought the hand of Shah Mir's daughter "out of reverence for the house of Hazrat Jilani".

This story was, presumably, an after-thought, a means to assuage the susceptibilities of the powerful Syeds, and also perhaps to satisfy the *amour propre* of Muhammad Mu'azzam himself. That the latter ascended the throne in the title of Abul-Naam Syed Qutb-ud-Din Muhammad, Shah Alam, Bahadur Shah Badshah lends credence to this supposition. The past, it is generally believed, cannot be changed. Many official Mughal historians laughed at what they thought was a trite saying.

Chapter 2

BEST OF THE BAD BROOD

A slight, miserable child, Mu'azzam was only one-year old when there came to an end the first term (1636-44) of Aurangzeb's vice-royalty of Deccan. In body lean and colour sickly-pale, he did not bear the look of a future emperor when, along with the ladies of the harem, he boarded the *palkis* on way to Agra. Together with his four-year old elder brother, Muhammad Sultan, he was under the charge of two *anagas*, four Deccani slave-girls and two fairly high-ranking eunuchs for the first three weeks of the march.

Thereafter, they travelled to Agra separately, Muhammad Sultan in the Viceregal entourage with Nawab Bai, and Mu'azzam with Phul Begum in that of the Deputy Commander, Bakht Bahadur Khan. Little is known of their time-table during the travel period except that the ageing physician, Sadr-ud-Din, was twice called to the Begum Sahiba's *khaima* for treatment of stomach aches that Mu'azzam suffered from. It was, perhaps, at this time that the star-gazer, Ali Muhammad, prepared and presented to the Begum a horoscope in which was forecast for the prince " a life of unhappy alternatives culminating in a finale of happiness and glory such as the sages yearn for". For reasons not difficult to understand, the shrewd Begum Sahiba did not reveal this reading to any one, not even to Nawab Bai. It was only on her death-bed at Agra twenty-one years later, that she took out the horoscope from her "sandalwood box of private papers" and handed it over to Nawab Bai with instructions in a halting voice: "Keep this to yourself. I shall die praying for my Muzz".

Like all Mughal princes, Mu'azzam lived in the harem at Agra up to the age of four. Thereafter, his schooling and training in the use of arms took the familiar, customary course under the guidance of Muslim divines and military experts. Among his spiritual preceptors, the name of Maulvi Karam Shah Sahib Sirhindi stands out "like a spotless red rose in

a bunch of decaying flowers". He was a kind-hearted, liberal teacher who was always for hearing the other side. The earth was all the home he had, the heaven his wide roof. History fascinated him so much so that he equated it with the command of God. Not only did he feed Mu'azzam with stories of courage and chivalry culled from the annals of Persia and Turkey; he also narrated to him chastening episodes from the lives of the ancient sages and seers of Hindustan. Love, he told his ward, was the principle of existence and its only end. Possessing as he did a receptive mind, Mu'azzam was fascinated by philosophical enunciations of the Shah, and he carried them to his mother, and sometimes to the Begum *dadi* with a degree of uncommon conviction and enthusiasm.

When on his return from the military campaign in Balkh, Aurangzeb came to know of the "airy mysteries" propounded by the "sage of Sirhind", he was quick to order the return of the Maulvi to his native village. With the departure of Karam Shah, Mu'azzam's zest for learning began to slacken and decay. He was never the same attentive self again. The Maulvi Sahib made a deep, lasting mark on his mind. Many of Mu'azzam's later day actions, as also the studied inactions, can be traced to the influence of this worthy individual.

When in 1646 Aurangzeb was appointed Governor of Multan and Sind, Nawab Bai went thither with her two sons and her two-year old daughter, Badr-un-Nissa. Not much is known of the activities of Sultan and Mu'azzam in Multan except that "suitable teachers were deputed to give them education in religion, history and languages". The circumcision ceremony was performed when Mu'azzam reached the age of six years, six months and six days. The occasion was celebrated in comparative low key with prayers, alms-giving, feeding of the poor and dawn-to-dusk recitations from the holy book. Aurangzeb presented Mu'azzam a gun and Nawab Bai a copy of the 'Quran' in letters of gold. A "personal message" came by the hand of a special messenger from the Begum Sahiba in Agra in which the good-hearted grandmother wished him happiness for all time, and invoked on him divine guidance for attainment of "all you desire and wish for". Mu'azzam was overjoyed to receive this brief note placed in a small ivory box. He laid the gun and the 'Quran' aside, and carried the little box to his room in the palace, kept it for days on a table by the side of his bed, and surrendered it to his mother only when the news-writer came to collect it for record. Phul Begum was a part and parcel of the little world in which Mu'azzam lived.

Phul Begum had a woman's charm and a man's perceptions of good and bad. Her heart lamented that liberalism could not live out of the teeth

of lamentation. She liked Aurangzeb, not his repressive policies. As constant as the Northern star in pursuit of values of the spirit, she prayed night and noon for guidance of the Lord, not for any specific objects of desire. Never did she contaminate her tongue with words either of anger or disrespect for the elders. Though not yet old enough to fully appreciate her virtues, Mu'azzam admired her secretly for the manner in which she prayed and sang sweetly in low notes songs in praise of truth and righteousness. To him, there was no gall in her admonishments, no terror in her threats. He loved her dearly. The result was that the Begum Sahiba's grandmotherly eye could see no fault in Mu'azzam's make-up. Her conviction was firm that the bright little mole on the palm of his left hand could not but be a signpost of greatness that lay in his way. This equation of mutual admiration was, perhaps, the seed of many worthy traits in Mu'azzam's character.

Muhammad Sultan was of a different kidney. He had neither the wit, nor the artlessness of his younger brother to stir the Begum's heart. His perspective was different, his interests more materialistic. Tender virtues left him cold. The hunt and the chase attracted him, as also the clang of arms and the awesome fights between drunken elephants. Neither religion nor history spurred his imagination. At nine, he was generally not Master Steadfast. Any means was good enough for him to attain what he aimed to get. Easily excitable, he set his face like a flint at the slightest provocation. Aurangzeb liked the steel in his eldest son's character, not his indifference to religion and matters of the spirit. He was reported to have told Nawab Bai: "I am not certain whether Sultan will make a good ruler. He seems to know the art of marching breast forward, but not the art of keeping in step with others". Despite his son's many infirmities, Aurangzeb doted over Sultan, and he did whatever he could to instil in him a little more balance and a lot more concern for religion. The parents of princes, as also of peasants, are prone to forget that characters are made in the womb of the mother, not in classrooms.

When in 1653 Aurangzeb was posted as Viceroy of Deccan for the second time, Sultan was thirteen and Mu'azzam ten — the twilight ages in which neither good nor bad is clearly discernible. It is true the Mughal princes matured early, and that once out of the safety of the harem they were expected to conform to the set standards of court behavior. To them, morality was a mechanical process, not something that required the guidance of the conscience or the inner voice. Both of them attended court, went hunting in the company of their respective guardians, practised archery and sword-play, learnt the use of muskets, attended

prayer-meetings of Fridays, listened to the long-winded discourses by tutors in religion and philosophy, assembled for family get - togethers after the evening meal in their own apartments, said the prescribed prayers before stepping on to their beds for the night — in fact, they did all that the Mughal princes did from the time Babar conquered Hindustan in the sixteenth century.

The years 1653 to 1658 were for Aurangzeb a period of trial and preparation. The Maharattas and the Sultanates taxed to the utmost his military genius as also his crusading zeal for the spread of orthodox Islam. He spent his second-term of five years in Deccan mostly in the camp. It was only rarely that he took with him his wives and children. Like Babar and Akbar, he preferred to take the field unencumbered by the paraphernalia of the harem. "The cause is in my will, I will not go out to fight with women and children hanging around", he once told Nawab Bai when she wanted to know the reason of his decision to go alone to wage war against Bijapur. This did not mean that he loved his wives and children less, but only that he loved victory more. Never did he take a chance when success was in the slightest doubt.

Aurangzeb's exhortation to Sultan when that prince was given a *mansab* of seven thousand on his fifteenth birthday bespoke clearly of his priorities. He spoke to him thus in full court:

This *mansab* is for you more a challenge than an honour. You have to be ruthless to a fault in denying yourself the pleasures of home when going out to defend your honour, your territory and your religion. One victory shall not neutralise a defeat, nor bravery in one case compensate the search for pleasure generally. It is good to win, best never to lose. Take my tip: To wage a war is a serious business. There is nothing that can be taken for granted on a battlefield. Distractions of pleasure have often turned victories into dismal defeats. To fight single-mindedly is the duty and *eeman* of a *mansabdar*.

Sultan raised his new, gold-handled sword to his forehead, and pledged in a few well-chosen words to follow the advice given by his father. Aurangzeb beamed a happy look, and ordered that Prince Sultan would accompany him in the next campaign against the Maharattas. Thus began a military career amidst hopes that turned out to be still-born. Sultan was no Aurangzeb. Neither was he a Mu'azzam.

In May 1656 there happened at Burhanpore something that showed in a way the stuff Mu'azzam was made of. A Mongolian puppy presented

to him by Phul Begum on his sixth birthday died following a stroke that paralysed his hind legs. The high-pedigree dog, named Daulat, was looked after by the prince with infinite love and care. Over the years, Daulat became so attached to him that on death-bed he would eat food or drink water only if it was offered personally by Mu'azzam. When the crippled pet, with love and helplessness showing in his tired eyes, shed life on May 30 with a heart-catching moan, Mu'azzam wept bitterly for hours, refusing to let the body to be carried out to the grave dug by the side of his apartment. It was only at the intervention of his mother that he repaired to his room, leaving Daulat to the "care of the angels who, I am certain, will escort him to a nook in the Garden of Eden". Two days later, he wrote a letter to the Begum Sahiba and obtained the permission of his father for its carriage to Agra by the state courier. Writing as if with a pen dipped in great anguish, he said:

Mohtrimma Dadi-Amma, you will be grieved to know that Daulat died on the thirteenth of the last month. He was in great pain following a stroke which crippled his hind legs. I did all that was possible to comfort him. He would not take any food or drink water from any other hand. His parting look of love-loaded helplessness haunts me day and night. I cannot believe he is gone for ever. His welcome yelps ring in my ears when I come to my apartment at sunset. He was a delightful companion and a friend of limitless courage and loyalty. The wagging of the tail as I came in, whatever the hour of day or night, was with him no hypocritical act of flattery; it was for him a compulsive show of faithfulness. He seemed to remember only the kindnesses extended to him. The scoldings, which I sometimes hurled upon him, apparently made no mark on him. He loved me with his heart and soul. His death has caused me immense pain. Tell me, revered *Amma-Dadi*, where do animals go after death? I will go and fetch him. He must be thinking of me wherever he may be. He knew all about my hours of play, hours of work, hours of rest, hours of sleep. If ever I was late in coming to my apartment, he seemed to ask, with a quizzical turn of his shapely head to the left, "what is the reason for this delay?" A gentle pet on the head would dispel his fears, and he would give an extra wag to his tail in happiness. May Allah preserve him in heaven for all time.

A marble slab with the inscription "Daulat, steadfast in love and loyalty" has been placed over his grave. The respected father sanctioned this tribute to my pet.

I place on the grave every morning pieces of food he liked best. I can

see him turn in the grave in suspense if I am late. Perhaps in due time I will get over the shock, but the memories of his love will continue to obsess me for as long as I live.

I shall wait anxiously for your kindly advice and guidance. I would not like to forget Daulat, neither would I like to be chased by his memories night and noon. This is a dilemma hard to resolve. Help me, the most respected grandmother.

Aurangzeb read this letter before despatch. He did not know whether to be happy or indignant; it contained some good thoughts, some unworthy of a prince who might some day ascend the throne of Hindustan. Soft, sentimental stuff irked him. That Mu'azzam lauded the virtue of loyalty was a plus point in his favour. He let the letter go as it was. It is not known whether he discussed the communication, directly or indirectly, with his son. The reply received from Phul Begum is also not traceable. Perhaps Aurangzeb intercepted it, and considered it best not to let the dialogue develop into philosophical heresy. Dogs and other pet animals had no place in Aurangzeb's book of priorities for royal princes. His approach was empirical: what helped the Mughal dynasty was good, what helped the empire was better, and what helped Islam was the best. Tears for Daulat did not fall in any of these categories. Yet he appreciated Mu'azzam's sentiments; they might not win him battles, but they might win him a minor place in the corridors of heaven.

Mu'azzam was fourteen by the time Aurangzeb left Burhanpur in 1657 to keep the date with destiny. Given the nominal command of an infantry division, he failed to catch his shrewd father's eye for any act of signal military advantage. Often he was heard to bemoan "this inter-family feud which is not likely to enhance the Mughal prestige". Mu'azzam was an unselfish being throughout his life, in principle though not in practice. He was more like a timid Sufi *darvesh* than a brave Mughal cavalier sworn to live by the power of his sword. He loved the camp life, though for reasons other than those that endeared it to the born soldier. He used to come out from his red-and-blue tent every evening like the bridegroom, not like the co-commander of a force hell-bent on changing the course of history. Aurangzeb was aware of the hidden epicure in Mu'azzam's anatomy, but he hoped, perhaps against his best judgment, that the hurly-burly of the camp would give his son the steel necessary for a successful commander.

Little is heard of Mu'azzam during the war of succession. That he was given a *mansab* of ten thousand just before the victor, Aurangzeb, entered

Agra in triumph on 10 June 1658 showed that the young prince made no unpardonable blunder in the course of the hotly-contested campaign. At Samugarh, he was in the rear of the left flank, and he was reported to have "initiated a useful diversionary move when the imperial army pressed hard against Prince Murad at the centre". Aurangzeb was pleased with Mu'azzam's tactics, and he mentioned his name in the post-victory address to commanders on the field.

The role of Muhammad Sultan at Dharmat and Samugarh was, however, more pronounced. He fought valiantly in both battles, showing promise as a tactician and courageous soldier. At Samugarh he repulsed a concerted attack launched by Ram Singh Rathor, and thus paved the way for victory which came an hour later. Sultan, a picture of pride and loyalty, stood by the side of his jubilant father as the latter came down his elephant and prepared to say the customary prayers in thankfulness. This was perhaps Sultan's finest moment yet. Aurangzeb acknowledged his son's heroism, and girded him with a replica of the sword of Timur which he regarded as the noblest symbol of Mughal heritage. Four days later, the prince was entrusted with the prestigious task of entering the capital and laying siege to the fort. The garrison put up only a token resistance and opened the gates when it became clear that Sultan would not be content with anything less than an unconditional surrender. Courage begets victory, and victory in turn generates more courage. Thus there came a tide in Sultan's affairs. He stood above all in Aurangzeb's camp. The more important development was that Aurangzeb began showing increasing trust in his eldest son's loyalty.

In Mughal India there was a road to the royal prison at Gwalior from every point of eminence. Some took it early, some late, and those few who escaped taking that route had reason to consider themselves the chosen ones of God. High ambition, morbid jealousies, family feuds, unthinking treachery and blatant disloyalty to the Emperor and his agents were the reasons for these incarcerations. Sultan reached the peak sooner than expected. Success spurred his ambition, and he saw visions of ascending the throne before his turn. The confusion and tumult arising from the war of succession, in his reckoning, were in favour of the brave in spirit. Aurangzeb stood in his way menacingly. When later in the year he was given the command of a sizeable army to check Shah Shuja's advance to Agra from Bengal, he thought the time had come to seize power—in conjunction with his uncle Shuja if necessary, alone if possible. To that end, he opened a secret dialogue with Shuja for "an alliance to defeat the forces of repression and religious fanaticism let

loose by my father". Shuja welcomed Sultan's hand of friendship. The two made plans to "fight the common enemy with all the forces at our command". The pact misfired; it had not taken into account the intelligence cell Aurangzeb had planted in all wings of the army. Sultan was defeated before he could join forces with Shuja. He fled to the hill territory, but was later captured and sent to the state prison in Gwalior. For twelve long years he remained a closely guarded prisoner behind the stone walls of that fort. He was restored to favour in 1671 when Mu'azzam fell from grace and was confined in the fort of Daultabad in Deccan.

Aurangzeb first gave a sick Sultan the boon of liberty and then four wives in five years — Murad's daughter, Dostdar Banu in 1672, Bai Bhut Devi, daughter of the Raja of Kishtwar, in 1674, niece of Daultabadi Mahal in 1675, and Munawar Khanum, daughter of Ahmad Raza Khan, in 1676. He died the same year at the age of thirty-seven. The court mourned the passing away of the prince for the customary twenty-one day period. Aurangzeb's grief had in it, perhaps, no heart-shriek. He often forgave treachery, but he never forgot it.

Four years after capturing the throne, Aurangzeb fell seriously ill in Agra. Fears for his life were openly expressed by physicians. Aurangzeb was in a miserable state of mind, not knowing whom to trust and whom to confide with the thoughts that arose in his head. "Find me a faithful friend, and I will give you his weight in gold", he told Roshanara Begum. The Emperor raved at all hours in contempt of disloyal persons, treacherous noblemen and untrustworthy princes.

Aurangzeb feared death as children fear to go in darkness. He wanted to live "for the sake of the empire God has thrown in my lap" and also for the sake of Islam and its followers. As the pains in the lower part of his body increased in frequency, his will to live wilted, and in despair he often cried aloud for Divine forgiveness. The attendants heard in these laments more than what was recorded on the ear-drum. Aurangzeb was penitent. His sins seemed to sit heavily on his heart. The law of retribution haunted him day and night. Perhaps he wanted to live to be able to neutralize bad with good. Gone was from his lean, pale face the look of a crusader in search of undying fame; instead there came to be written on his visage the varied shades of despair and helplessness. That change meant different things to different men. Roshanara and other senior ladies felt the time had come to let him do his soul-saving arithmetic in solitude. The chances of his survival were gradually becoming slender.

In the midst of this confusion, there appeared fast-spreading rumours that plans were hatching all around for forcible seizure of power in the event of Aurangzeb succumbing under the weight of his daily-increasing discomfiture. In the centre of one of these plots was reported to be no other than the nineteen-year-old Prince Mu'azzam. His mother, Nawab Bai, was believed to have master-minded the conspiracy with the help of a section of Muslim and Rajput dignitaries.

This "insufferable scheming" by the Emperor's wife and son sent Roshanara Begum into fits of uncontrolled rage. She ordered her personal eunuchs to drag Nawab Bai by her hair out of the royal apartment and to lock her up in a room outside the palace. Swearing in non-stop hyperbole, she loudly begged the Bestower of Life to "convey sterility in the culprit's womb and dry up her organs of reproduction". Never before had such foul words fallen from the lips of a royal princess. When angry, Roshanara was a marble-hearted fiend more vulgar than the coffin-maker's wife. Perhaps it may not be an over-exaggeration to say that, unlike common women, a majority of Mughal princesses were either villains or fools. Passion for power seemed to be the instinct of all those born behind the stately walls of an emperor's harem.

Later investigations revealed that neither Nawab Bai nor Mu'azzam was actively involved in the alleged plot. The brain-child of some Rajput dissenters, the rumour died down as suddenly as it took wings. Both Nawab Bai and Mu'azzam returned to favour after spending some time in the harrowing wilderness of royal distrust.

Illness soon grows familiar with the ill man. Aurangzeb calmed down when it became clear that the gods had granted his request for some more time on earth. Nawab Bai returned to his bedside. The wife in the mother was not lot —not yet. The stormy lady, Roshanara Begum, took some time to bow to realities. The days of her eminence were fast coming to an end. She was a princess of the old school who took to the *tasbih* as they grew old. Despondency has in it a spiritual spring.

A year later, at the age of twenty, Mu'azzam was posted to the much-coveted Viceroyalty of Deccan—an honour that came not because he deserved it, but because there was no other royal prince of age to hold it. His *mansab* was raised to twenty thousand, and the robes of honour bestowed on him were of the same order as were given to Aurangzeb himself on his first appointment to that post in 1636. In his farewell message, the Emperor, who knew the Deccan as intimately as he did the lines of destiny on the palm of his right hand, spelt out clearly the hazards in the peninsula, and he also held out advice how best to meet them. A

sentence sandwiched between the warning and the advice was significant not for its philosophical content, but because of its veiled reference to the fruit of disloyalty. "One leak will sink a man-of-war, and one sin will destroy the sinner", he said with the firmness of an all-knowing prophet, and he bade his son to follow the ways of the righteous and the courageous. Mu'azzam bowed in touching subservience, and departed without leaving anyone in doubt of his resolve to live by the highest norms of faithfulness.

For the next ten years, Mu'azzam carried on what may be called a running conflict with Maharattas on the one hand and the Sultanates on the other. His failure to tame, much less subdue, either led the peace-loving prince to pray most fervently for a life free from wars, hatreds, jealousies and sufferings of the soul. It became clear that he was not cut out for the smoke and stir of the south, and that his heart lay in the way of all pleasure-loving princes. Apathy to the battle-field brought him in conflict with his Deputy, the single-minded Dilir Khan who was a born soldier, and he made no scruple of declaring it. Shivaji's fortune was on high tide. All the courses of his life showed that he was not in the roll of common men. He seemed to have trampled underfoot his fears of the Mughal might, and scored many spectacular victories against the heavy-footed imperial armies. Alarmed at these setbacks, Dilir Khan sent many secret despatches to the Emperor, complaining of Mu'azzam's increasing indifference to military affairs and suggesting a change in command at the top.

In one of his dutiful submissions to Aurangzeb, Dilir Khan wrote:

Loyalty urges me, Your Majesty, to inform that the worthy prince, obsessed with the virtues of peace, is known to have made confidential approaches to the Maharatta ruler, as also to the Sultans, for stoppage of hostilities and making peace at terms which could not but be detrimental to our interests. The most revolting tactics followed by the Maharatta guerillas have gone unpunished.

Discreet attempts to convince the prince of the necessity of waging an all-out war have gone unheeded. The prince seems to be living in perpetual doubt — a state of mind that will not permit a positive step. He to himself is dearer than any friend or counsellor. A stage has reached where he regards his life as the *Nauroz* of time. It is unfortunate that nothing is more to him than himself—a mode of self-love that has bred discontentment in all sections of the army. It is an ancient Persian saying that he that seeks pleasure is void of all reason. Our prestige in the Deccan

has never been so low as it is today.

In the end, I submit most humbly that the time seems to have come for Your Majesty to take the command in your own blessed hands. If the wily enemies are permitted at this point of time to consolidate their positions, we may find it extremely difficult to oust them from our territories. The Mughal authority is at stake. The entire scene will change overnight the day Your Majesty announces his decision to pitch the royal tent, for howsoever short a period, at Burhanpur.

Aurangzeb respected Dilir Khan's judgment and integrity. Being aware of Mu'azzam's love for peace and pleasure, he was inclined to accept Dilir Khan's suggestion. But the considerations of health went against a long trek to the south. Besides, the outbreak of minor rebellions necessitated the Emperor's presence in the north. He appreciated Dilir Khan's concern, and wrote that he would not delay coming to the south for a moment longer than was necessary. However, he sent sizeable reinforcements to prop up the morale of the army.

Some months later, an opportunity came to pull Mu'azzam out of the Deccan and to give him an alternative command. The Shah of Persia threatened to invade Hindustan after capturing the strongholds of Qandhar and Kabul. To buttress defences in the north-west, Aurangzeb planned to send there a powerful armed force under Prince Mu'azzam. The far-seeing Nawab Bai discerned in this move a plot to demote her son. Her hopes of retaining ascendancy in the harem rested on Mu'azzam. He was her only remaining prop, therefore he must be prevented from accepting an assignment bristling with infinite hazards. She lost no time in sending to Mu'azzam a secret message, advising against acceptance of the command offered. He agreed with his mother's apprehensions and, on one pretext or the other, delayed departure from Burhanpur. Aurangzeb saw in Mu'azzam's reluctance a faint heart and a mind not big enough to consider danger an opportunity—no more. He did not press compliance with the order of posting.

Mu'azzam continued for some years to follow the easy path of pursuing sensual passions. The only pleasant society, according to him, was shapely women with charms of look and manner. Other people, he wrote to his concubine, Niaz Zeenat, were quite dreadful. Mu'azzam was in his youthful element in the Deccan. He and his bevy of beauties was his world. Shivajis, Sultans and all other disturbers of peace were left to be dealt with by Dilir Khan and his band of senior and junior commanders.

The path of pleasure is, at its best, a bylane of egoism. All passions are like balls of snow; they become bigger as they are indulged in. It was not long before Mu'azzam became a slave of self-love. He thought his geese swans and his will the will of the Lord — a type of narcissism that could not but arouse the anger and hostility of the court in Agra. The failure to score points against Shivaji did the rest. Aurangzeb addressed to him a strongly-worded letter, reminding him of the specific purpose of Mughal presence in the south and asking him to "practise impatience in calling a halt to the barbarities being committed by our enemies". The Emperor also remarked that "the camp is not a *tarab-khana* for placation of the senses, but the home of the soldier charged with the responsibility to safeguard the interests of the empire". The unkindest cut of all was that Aurangzeb threatened "appropriate steps in case our expectations are not fulfilled before we enter the holy month of Ramzan".

To a pleasure-seeker few things hurt more than to be told that he is a pleasure-seeker. Mu'azzam was virtually up in arms after reading the strictures passed on his mode of life, as also on his mode of operations on the field. The thoughts of a rebellion raced in his hot head, and he did the indiscreet act of writing to the Emperor that "the implied allegations have no basis in truth". Aurangzeb's response was quick and firm. "Hand over the charge of your office temporarily to Dilir Khan. You will delay obedience to this order at your own peril", he wrote in his own handwriting.

Mu'azzam's pride was hurt. He shut himself in the Viceroy's mansion, sent for astrologers, and when he came out eight days later it was to tell Dilir Khan that his services were no more required, and that he should repair to the court before the next full moon was sighted. This was an act of open rebellion. This was also a measure of his despondency. A small junta of junior loyal commanders was ordered to "ensure support of the armed forces in case of trouble". The drums of a distant civil war were now faintly heard. But for the coolness of Dilir Khan, who stood unperturbed by these sudden developments, the streets of Burhanpur might have seen Mughals fighting Mughals for supremacy in the city. He called on the prince and explained to him the grim implications of the step he had taken. Mu'azzam listened attentively, but did not for the time show willingness to withdraw the order. Neither did he press his demand to a point of break in relations.

Playing as he was for time, Dilir Khan succeeded in assuring Mu'azzam that the Emperor would not take a serious view of what was in all appearance an act of revolt if he sought forgiveness and requested for

withdrawal of the recall *firman*. Mu'azzam was in a quandary. He too chose to play for time, and let the things remain where they were till fresh instructions were received from Agra.

Meanwhile, Dilir Khan sent a report to Agra in which he, very wisely, suggested that the prince's mother, Nawab Bai, be sent to Burhanpur on a mission of reconciliation. Though at first against "compromising with insubordination", Aurangzeb accepted the recommendation when Nawab Bai herself approached him with "tears in her eyes and misery writ large over her face". The final scene in this drama was a meeting at Burhanpur between Mu'azzam and Nawab Bai. The motherly love triumphed over the son's recalcitrance. The success of her mission pleased Aurangzeb. Mu'azzam was permitted to hold the prestigious post for another three years. The disobedience act was forgiven, not forgotten.

The passion and the pain of finite hearts that yearn for pleasure cannot be fathomed by those who shun pleasure. Aurangzeb was at best a crusader, at worst a fierce fanatic. In both these roles, there was no place for gaiety in his life. He was an iconoclast, a visionary who wished to change the face of society in Hindustan. He dismantled temples, raised magnificent mosques in their place, sanctioned forcible conversion, levied discriminatory taxes, and did all that was possible to bring about a one-religion state. Hindustan baulked him. The multiplicity of spiritual values remained intact. His defeat was the triumph of a composite civilisation rich in religious diversity. The ascetic Emperor was a sad and penitent man on the death-bed. None of his progeny — five sons and five daughters — inherited either the saintliness or the severity of his character. Mu'azzam was a liberal prince, committed to peace and fond of the good things of life. If Aurangzeb was good, he was bad, and vice versa. There was no meeting place in their traits of character.

The deteriorating military situation in the Deccan necessitated Mu'azzam's transfer in 1673 to the Viceroyalty of the North-western provinces of Kabul, Punjab and Sind. He was not happy to leave the Deccan where he had spent the best part of his youth. The North-west attracted him for different reasons; it was nearer the capital and comparatively free from the wars and depredations that made Deccan the scourge of daring desperadoes.

Three years later, in 1676, Mu'azzam received the high title Shah Alam for his successes against the Yusafzais and other militant tribes. It now became clear that Aurangzeb had chosen him as his successor. Great honours awaited him when he returned to the court in 1678. Nawab Bai welcomed him two stages from Agra, and she personally escorted him to Aurangzeb's presence.

Once she was beautiful, therefore good; now she was good, therefore beautiful. The Emperor no longer doted over her, but he gave her the consideration and respect due to a good friend. While ushering Mu'azzam to her royal husband's presence, she dropped protocol, and said: "Here is our Muzz. He is now over thirty, but I see in him a toddler just learning to walk. He has not changed much over the years. His eyes are as full of sparkle as they used to be, and his smile as infectious. Forget for a while that you are the Badshah of Hindustan. Receive him as a father who loves him dearly. This will be the greatest honour you can confer upon him. He calls me just *amma*. Permit him to call you *abba*. The court formalities can wait for a day."

Aurangzeb was enchanted by this piece of informal introduction. He took Mu'azzam in his long, lanky arms, looked at him with the intensity of a fond parent's love, and invited him to sit between "me and your mother". Nawab Bai was delighted at the informality of the *khushamdeed* extended by the tradition-conscious Emperor. For full two *gharis*, the trio talked not about Maharattas and Afridis, but about plums and mangoes and melons of the south and the north-west. When the time came for Mu'azzam to repair to his apartment, he did not do the *taslim* or *zaminbos*, but touched his father's knee instead, and remained entwined in his arms for a while before turning to Nawab Bai who had already raised her hands in prayers. She asked the benign Allah for no boon, but merely thanked Him with all her soul for the bounty of mutual love. When Mu'azzam turned to touch the knee of his mother as well, she retracted, recited in low notes some lines from the Quran, and gave him a holy kiss on the forehead before taking him by the hand and escorting him out of the royal apartment through the same door by which he came in. To go out by another door was, in Persian tradition, both inauspicious and a sign of discord. Later, in one of his many letters to those he loved and admired, Aurangzeb wrote: "Allah presided at our reunion. Never before had I felt so happy and contented. Nawab Bai played the fairy angel with touching artlessness. Age has given her a new kind of beauty. The *tasbih* in her hand was the richest ornament I ever saw her wear".

A de facto *wali-aahad*, Mu'azzam sat on the Emperor's right in the Hall of Audience, received foreign dignitaries, held charge of the royal seal, presided over the meetings of *mansabdars* and other noblemen, served as a link between the Emperor and the Prime Minister, sent *firmans* to the provincial Governors on behalf of his father, opened and often dealt with appeals addressed to the monarch, arbitrated in disputes between autonomous rulers — in fact, he came to represent the will of the Emperor on the one hand and the will of the nobility on the other. His

controlled liberalism, unlike the much-flaunted liberalism of Dara Shikoh, endeared him to non-Muslims in general and Rajputs in particular. Aurangzeb appreciated his role as a peace-maker between the extremists in the two main religious communities. In brief, the Prince became the centre of political, religious and cultural activities in the capital. His stock was high, his future promising.

In the south, Shivaji continued to be a thorn in the side of the Mughal forces. His passion for plunder expelled for the time his all other passions. His treasury was never so full of stolen gold and silver as in the decade 1670-80. The population dreaded his roving bands of guerillas. When they fell on a village, a hamlet or a city, the destruction they wrought was total. No one escaped their wealth-combing operations. Foreign and Indian traders were particularly hunted for their hoards of riches. Affluent agriculturists were squeezed dry of their stores of foodgrains. The honour of women was left untouched, not the pieces of jewellery they wore around their necks, their wrists, their ankles and their heads. Children were robbed of their paisas and copper amulets, and left crying in the arms of their helpless mothers.

The reports of these devastations anguished Aurangzeb, not because of their brutal savagery but because they brought into focus the despair and incompetency of the Mughal forces. It became increasingly clear that some effective steps had to be taken to check these orgies of pillage. The reposting of Shah Alam to the Deccan suggested itself. The north needed him but, felt the Emperor, the south needed him more. Early in 1678, the posting of Shah Alam as Viceroy for the second time was announced. It looked as if the history was in the process of repeating itself. Twenty years earlier, Aurangzeb came to the throne following his appointment to Deccan for the second time. Many old-time noblemen scratched their beards in thoughtful speculation.

However, developments in Mewar and Marwar, culminating in the revolt of Prince Akbar, resulted in quick changes of scene both in the north and the south. Aurangzeb himself led a massive force to Rajasthan to establish the supremacy of Mughal arms. Shah Alam rushed to Ajmer to be by the side of his father in that hour of crisis. His eighteen-month stay at Burhanpur had served little useful purpose. Shivaji and his son, Shambuji, did not wear even for a day the garb of angels out of fear for the new Viceroy. They refused even to respond to Shah Alam's diplomatic overtures. The trouble in Rajasthan was an opportunity they had been waiting for many years. A Maharatta-Rajput alliance, they hoped, would destabilise Mughal hegemony in the two regions. These expecta-

tions turned out to be more wishful than realistic. Aurangzeb was not the man to be cowed down by minor setbacks here and there. After defeating prince Akbar near Ajmer, he marched to the south with the declared objective of rubbing out the Maharattas and their supporters from the face of Deccan. Shah Alam went with him. Thus began a new chapter in the history of the Mughals. Aurangzeb never returned to the north. For full twenty-five years (1682-1707) he waged relentless wars against the Maharattas and the Shiite Sultanates of Bijapur and Golcanda. His successes and setbacks were both spectacular. In the end, he did realize his ambition of being the ruler of the whole of Hindustan. The price he paid for that achievement was indeed very heavy. The empire disintegrated into heaps of magnificent ruins following his death in 1707.

There were three simple, primary passions in the life of Shah Alam: joy, love, desire. Whereas these passions elevated him above others, they also turned out to be the source of many of his misfortunes. The Konkan expedition, of which he was the commander, was an unmixed disaster mainly because of his pronounced bias for peace and the consequent inability to wage a total war. Thereafter, his secret fraternization with the ruler of Golcanda confirmed Aurangzeb in his suspicion that Shah Alam was a Trojan Horse. The prince was arrested and lodged in the fort at Daultabad. For eight long years (1687-95) he remained shut behind the formidable walls of that citadel, not permitted to meet or correspond with friends and relatives outside. He was released only when Aurangzeb despaired of further victories in this world and prepared for journey to the next.

Prince Azam (mother Dilraz Begum) was more ambitious than wise. Aurangzeb distrusted all men, but an over-ambitious prince was, to him, more vile than a vicious viper. The only other remaining son, Kam Baksh (mother Udaipuri Mahal) ran himself out of the race for succession because of what the historian Bhimsen called "his unguided lusts, unholy beliefs and ill-bred manners like that of a maniac". Shah Alam was the best of the bad brood of Aurangzeb's male progeny.

In accordance with the orthodox Sunni tradition, Aurangzeb made a will for partition of the Empire among the three sons. However, the Fate decreed otherwise. Shah Alam became the seventh Mughal Emperor after defeating Muhammad Azam in a sharp battle near Agra. Kam Baksh was defeated in an unequal engagement near Hyderabad two years later.

The high-judging Jove helped Shah Alam at every stage of the mini-war of succession, and he proceeded step by a fast step towards occupation of the Peacock Throne. First, He made available to him the wise

counsel and experience of Munim Khan, a soldier-statesman, as full of age as wisdom, blessed in both. Then He conveyed jealousy and distrust in the hearts of Muhammad Azam and his sons, factors that slowed down their march to Agra and enabled Shah Alam to be the first to reach the capital. And, above all, in the crucial battle against Muhammad Azam near Agra, He sided with Shah Alam at critical stages of a sharp, fierce conflict and gave him victory. Azam and his two sons, Badar Bakht and Wala Jah, died fighting with a rare show of courage.

The youngest son of Aurangzeb, Kam Baksh, declared himself Emperor at Bijapur immediately after hearing the news of his father's death. Treachery, a weed that grows in every soil, undid him. His officers and commanders deserted him one by one for selfish reasons of expediency. Furthermore, his lusts and explosions of high temper bred discontent and apathy to his causes in all ranks of his army. It was a force divided against itself that marched out of Bijapur in early 1709 to meet the invasion launched by Bahadur Shah himself. Kam Baksh's defeat and death in a battle near Hyderabad confirmed Bahadur Shah as the sole, unchallenged successor of Alamgir.

Kindness is a victor's instrument of revenge. Following his triumphs, first against Muhammad Azam and later against Kam Baksh, Bahadur Shah extended extreme courtesies to the families of his step-brothers. To win and shed tears is given only to a few of the humankind. Bahadur Shah cried openly when he stood by the side of his dead kinsmen, prayed for forgiveness, and pledged himself soulfully to look after the families of the princes. A king without compassion in his heart is no king at all. With all his faults, Bahadur Shah lived up to the finest traditions of kingship in Hindustan.

The noblest words have often proceeded from victors who respected their enemies. Akbar was choked with sorrow when he heard the news of the death of Rana Pratap. "He was my dearest enemy. The death has robbed me of a valiant foe. The like of him tread the earth only rarely", he told the ministers present. Though his laments did not carry the same weight of prestige as did Akbar's, Shah Alam's anguish was of the same vintage: "I am poorer for this victory. Life has gone out of my brother. The throne is no compensation for this loss. Bahadur Shah will never be Mu'azzam again. The present taunts the past. The future is shrouded in uncertainties. To lose a battle is bad, to win is worse. I am baffled", he said when the commanders came to felicitate him following the retreat in disorder of Azam's vanquished army.

A letter Bahadur Shah wrote to Muhammad Azam after Agra surren-

dered to the joint forces of Azim-ush-Shan* and Munim Khan is a revealing exposition of the values dear to him. Alarmed at the thought of his having to take up arms against his brother, he wrote:

The art of our compulsions is strange: They can make vile things precious. It saddens me no end to visualise your war elephant pitched against mine. I wonder what will remain of our souls after the fighting is over. It is immaterial who wins or loses. Let us save ourselves the agony and shame of having to shoot lead balls and poisoned arrows at each other. To that end, I propose partition of the Empire as per our revered father's last will and testament. To fight among ourselves is, in fact, to fight against our parents. The agony of that thought is sharper than the serpent's tooth. Let us live together in harmony and in love. That way lies the everlasting glory of the house of the Mughals. The benign Allah, I feel, will be pleased if we eschew war and chalk out our lives in accordance with the Divine principles of peace and amity. The sword is a poor arbiter of the fate of men. Let reason prevail.

A similar letter was sent by Bahadur Shah to Kam Baksh. Like Azam, he too thought that the communication betrayed his brother's weakness, not strength. Money was the sinews of war in medieval times. Both of them possessed more gold and silver coins in their chests than the six and a half million rupees known to have been gathered by Shah Alam from the imperial treasury before he left Jamrud** in the middle of May, 1707. The entire liquid assets of Aurangzeb estimated roughly at approximately twenty-two million rupees, fell to Muhammad Azam. The treasury at Bijapur contained over fifteen million rupees. The larger money-power gave them notions of invincibility. They scoffed at Bahadur Shah's proposal for partition. "Empires are not real estates. They are won or lost in entirety by the sword. There is no other way", observed Muhammad Azam when Asad Khan suggested a careful consideration of the views expressed by Bahadur Shah. Neither realized that generosity, not guile, lay behind the plan of division. Over-ambition made them deaf to the call of reason. They paid for the error with their lives.

* Azim-ush-Shan was Bahadur Shah's son by Amrita Bai, daughter of Raja Roop Singh Rathor. He was born on 16 December 1664. Aurangzeb rated him high for his intelligence and administrative abilities. He was posted as Governor of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in 1701.

** Shah Alam was at Jamrud in the north-west at the time of Aurangzeb's death. After release from prison in 1695, he was first posted as Governor of Akbarabad and after a year, as Governor of Lahore, Multan and Uch. In 1699 he was appointed Governor of Kabul at the death of Amin Khan. He proclaimed himself Emperor at the bridge of Shah Daula, twenty-four miles north of Lahore

Chapter 3

BLOOM OF YOUTH

BAHADUR Shah was sixty-five when he came to the throne — a point of age at which the people generally begin to live in the past and look to the future only to hope for a painless death. He looked backwards to his ancestors, not forward to posterity. His loves and passions were burnt out, and in their place had arisen an enfeebling fear of the unknown. He reckoned himself more a caretaker than the ruler of an Empire. To protect what he inherited became his goal; expansion and new conquests fell outside his ken. At court, the ever loyal Munim Khan and the widely experienced Asad Khan stood firm in safeguarding the interests of the kingdom. The two senior wives, Mihar Parwar (Mihar-un-Nissa Begum) and Amat-ul-Habib (Aziz-un-Nissa Khanum), used their instinctive wisdom to keep the harem on an even keel. Their men's minds and the facility to hide realities behind their perfumed tresses ensured for the ageing Emperor a pleasant place of retreat from the raging conflicts all around.

Parwar and Aziz would not have been the normal species of the human female had their relationship not been a see-saw of heart-searing jealousies and uplifting good cheer. Bahadur Shah ignored the undercurrents of mutual suspicion and took only their *bonhomie* for self fulfilment. "They are so true to themselves that they cannot be false to others", he told the Vizir, Asad Khan, when the latter referred to a rumoured plot-hatching in the seraglio to raise Munim Khan to the coveted post of Prime Minister. It is, however, true that Mihar Parwar was one of those who did not hesitate to set a house on fire to boil her egg, but that was only a small part of her character. Her much-quoted saying that "we cannot command a royal husband except by obeying him" is perhaps a more accurate indicator of her inner mind. Like Nur Jahan Begum, she wanted to rule by being ruled by one man. On the other hand, Aziz-un-Nissa was less

circumspect and more strong-willed than Mihar Parwar. If her heart was in a matter, to deflect her from it was not given to any man, much less to a woman. Tears, smiles, frowns and scowls were the weapons in her armoury that seldom went abegging. Bahadur Shah was aware of this trait in her make-up. Still he admired and loved her. It did not matter to him that for the greater part of her life she was no more than a bejewelled obstruction to the wishes of other members of the seraglio. Ravishingly beautiful in youth, Aziz was in old age a model of self-conscious dignity that comes with passing years. A slave-girl of Pathan origin, she caught the eye of Shah Alam when he was given the command of a division in the north-west. The marriage took place at Attock in 1673. Aurangzeb was understandably half-hearted in giving his approval. Her hopes were less, hence her loyalty was the more steadfast. Shah Alam's love for her grew as the years went by. She stood by him firmly through thick and thin. It is an irony of fate that neither Parwar nor Aziz bore a child. They sought compensation in dauntless devotion to their husband.

Of the other four wives of Bahadur Shah, the most distinguished was Nur-un-Nissa, daughter of Shujat Khan, and Zeenat-i-Alam, a grand-niece of Mumtaz Mahal Begum. She came to exercise much influence over Shah Alam when he was Viceroy in the Deccan. Aurangzeb liked her not so much for her noble heritage, but because of her pluck and ready wit. Once she did the rare act of rallying a defeated Mughal Division and hold the Maharatta horsemen at bay after Shah Alam had fled to the safety of a fort twenty miles away. This gallant recovery was, in the words of Bhimsen, in the high tradition of Rajput queens and princesses who kept themselves in readiness to take the field in an emergency. The Emperor applauded her bravery, and gave her rich gifts of money and jewellery. "We are proud of our Nur", he recorded in the official history of the war against Maharattas.

Some women are faithful by nature, some by necessity. These two categories of faithfulness have the character and style of their own. The first brand liberates, and the second uplifts only temporarily. Nur-un-Nissa belonged to the first classification. Her compulsive faithfulness, whatever the circumstances, endeared her to Shah Alam to a point of complete surrender to her will. He took no decision and mounted no action without first ascertaining her wishes. When she died in Kabul in 1701 after a short illness, the prince lamented, "Allah has snatched away from me my best friend and counsellor. The vacuum frightens me. Her virtues were not her looks, but her irrepressible loyalty".

The news of her passing away was not conveyed to the ailing

Aurangzeb for nearly a year lest the shock aggravate his illness. When he came to know in 1702 that "Nur is no more", he held his head between his hands and remained in that posture of intense grief for many a long *lamha*. Words apparently failed him. His sorrow was beyond expression. An urgent message was, however, sent to Shah Alam that a tomb "worthy of her virtues" be built over her grave. The *mansab* of her only child, Rafi-ul-Qadr, was raised by ten thousand, a tribute not to his any act of signal gallantry, but a homage to the high-minded goodness of his mother.

Bahadur Shah's harem wore the look of a house where the least influential lady wore the most attractive look. Rani Chattar Bai was a dazzling damsel of eighteen when Shah Alam inducted her into his seraglio. Besides looks, she possessed little else. Her intelligence was below normal, her loyalty suspect. Her colour and health faded away quickly, and so did the infatuation of Shah Alam. Aurangzeb frowned upon this marriage as being "without a basis either in necessity or considerations of honour". Shah Alam's insistence, it is believed, led to the rift that culminated in the prince's imprisonment in 1676. Bhimsen described her as "a rose with no honey in its petals", and said that it was no surprise that she was not blessed with a child. In a Mughal harem a woman needed more than ruddy cheeks and fair limbs to continue in favour for long. When she died at Agra in 1691, the obsequies were marked by the absence of real or feigned mourning. "Some hired tears were shed at her grave", wrote the historian Abdul Qadir.

Love would not be what it is if it were permanent. The Mughal princes fell in love afresh every full moon. In the heyday of his youth, Akbar Padshah boasted that the walls of his pleasure-houses never saw a woman twice. Shah Alam was not of that hard mould. As against Akbar's five thousand, the number of his mistresses and concubines did not exceed one hundred fifty by the time he turned fifty. The wives ranked higher in a prince's esteem and time-table. He was under moral obligation to visit their apartments at short, regular intervals. The rest depended upon the wit, charm and intelligence of the Begum herself.

Shah Alam's marriage with Amrita Bai, daughter of Raja Roop Singh Rathor*, was a political alliance; the heart was in no way involved in this contractual bond. Amrita was not a charmer of irresistible female magnetism. She was a simple woman, honest to God and to herself. Her

* The ruler of Kishengarh, Raja Roop Singh Rathor fought on the side of Dara Shikoh in the war of succession in 1658. He was killed at Samugarh.

artlessness and a sense of humour aroused in Shah Alam a secret admiration for her. This respect, in due time, bloomed into what may be called secondary love. Amrita played the legally wedded wife with such devotion and faithfulness that for nearly two decades she remained the centre of the prince's affection. Her two children, daughter Daulat Afza and son Muhamad Azim, were the envy of the less fertile ladies of the harem. Muhammad Azim, who grew into a sturdy, handsome boy interested in all types of manly sport, was given by Shah Alam the title Azim-ush-Shan. It is believed that, disappointed with the calibre of his sons, Aurangzeb at one time nursed the thought of nominating Azim his successor. Asad Khan prevented him from hurting the susceptibilities of his sons. Azim went on to play a decisive role in the war of succession. But for his spectacular dash to Agra from Bengal following the death of Aurangzeb, the Peacock Throne might well have eluded Bahadur Shah.

At the time of Bahadur Shah's death in 1712, Azim-ush-Shan was the first to declare himself emperor. The three other sons conspired, with the help of Zulfiqar Khan*, to oust Azim and partition the Empire among themselves. On 17 March, Azim's army was defeated in a battle that raged furiously for three days. Hit by a cannon-shot, Azim's elephant, Tez Raftar, bolted away, rushed into the River Ravi, and both were drowned. Had Azim won, the decline of the Mughal Empire might have been halted for some time. This is a speculative exercise of the type that emerges often at crucial points in history. The rise and fall of empires is governed perhaps not by the virtues and vices of individual kings, but by the totality of circumstances prevailing at the time. Azim-ush-Shan was a bold and capable prince. This does not, however, mean that he could have changed the course of British ships swarming in the Indian ocean.

Nizam Bai**, whom Shah Alam married at the early age of seventeen belonged to the noblest house in Hyderabad. Her father, Fatehyawar Jang, did great service to Aurangzeb in wars against the Sultanates. The matrimonial alliance was, in fact, a recognition of the "devotion, loyalty and courage" with which the members of that distinguished family supported the Mughal cause. The wedding took place at Agra on 12

* Zulfiqar Khan was son of Asad Khan, long-time Prime Minister of Aurangzeb. Both of them came to the side of Bahadur Shah after the defeat of Muhammad Azam in 1707. Zulfiqar Khan became Prime Minister when Jahandar Shah became Emperor. He was executed by Syed brothers in the reign of Farakh-Siyyar.

** There are different versions with regard to the identity of Nizam Bai. The one taken here seems to be the most credible. A British traveller, Jack Hogg, described her as "a dancing-girl in the house of a Nawab in Hyderabad".

March, 1660, with traditional festivities. Nizam Bai was not good-looking by the classical yardstick, but the never-fading sparkle of her smiles gave her face the charm the artists failed to portray correctly. Muiz-ud-Din (Jahandar Shah) was born thirteen months later — an offspring of young hearts and immature understandings. Nizam Bai was, however, not destined to see her son wear the crown imperial. Her death in 1692 at Delhi was deeply mourned by Aurangzeb and other senior members of the royal family. The writer of 'Bahadur-nama', Danish-mand Khan, records that "though she at one stage exercised great influence over the prince, she never abused it"— a tribute which in effect meant that she seldom meddled in public affairs. She limited her interests to religion, arts and charity. A large part of her privy purse was spent on providing dowries for the marriage of poor girls.

The fourth and the youngest son of Shah Alam, Khajista Akhtar (Jahan Shah), was born in 1679. His mother was, in all probability, a mistress by the name of Dilruba. He was killed in a battle against Muiz-ud-Din following the death of Bahadur Shah in 1712. Little is known about his personality and traits of character. One thing is, however, clear that Bahadur Shah loved him dearly. On his death-bed, he held Jahan Shah's hand, and his lips were seen to move in prayer. Asad Khan divined the Emperor's thoughts, and said, "The great Lord will look after him. Have no worry, Your Majesty".

All four sons were with Bahadur Shah when he entered the fort in Agra two days after defeating Muhammad Azam in the battle of Jajau. A prince come to fortune in declining years was in want of support of all his *aulad*. The tasks that lay before him were complex and challenging. The five of them made their way to the Moti Masjid. Success breeds humility; it also brings one near to God. The reign of Bahadur Shah began on a note of common endeavour in pursuit of modest expectations.

Chapter 4

SYMPATHETIC SOUL

THE wheel came full circle when Bahadur Shah ascended the throne vacated by Alamgir after liquidating the fifty-five-year-old Muhammad Azam and his two sons, Badar Bakht and Wala Jah, in a battle fought in intense heat not far from Samugarh. Fifty-two years earlier, Aurangzeb seized the throne by defeating his brother, Dara Shikoh, at the same place. The symbolic entry into the Throne Room at Agra took place with traditional fanfare on 28 June, 1707—a day declared propitious by a team of court astrologers headed by the master star-gazer, Syed Ali Muhammad Sirshar. The new Emperor's four sons flanked him in the order of seniority in age. The loyal and valiant Munim Khan, badly wounded in the battle, was brought in on a silver stretcher. Bahadur Shah embraced the pale-faced, exhausted Vazir, and said in a voice that could be heard by every one present: "Our victory is due, above all, to your valour. Allah be praised for giving us a friend and adviser of your wisdom and courage"

Before announcing awards and honours for his sons, Bahadur Shah conferred on Munim Khan the title Khan-i-Khanan Zafar Jang Bahadur, raised his *mansab* from five thousand to seven thousand, announced a cash award of twenty million *dams* (forty *dams* = one rupee) gave his eldest son, Naim Khan, the title Mahabat Khan Bahadur, and his youngest son, Mukarram Khan, was made Khan-i-Zaman. Overwhelmed with this show of generosity the heavily bandaged nobleman raised both his hands in gratitude and, unable to speak, expressed his thoughts in a few glittering tears. Bahadur Shah came up to him, held his right hand in his own, and said: "The language you used is more eloquent than any words could be. Make no further effort, my friend, my saviour. What I owe to you is a million times more than what I gave you. I speak what I feel. Your tears and your wounds both smack of honour. You live in

deeds, not years, in feelings, not in the cycles of the sun and stars. The world has little to bestow where loyalty reigns. Our gestures to you are only symbolic. May the benign Allah compensate you for the sufferings you have endured for our sake."

The sweet sound of these words of praise went straight to the heart of Munim Khan. He raised his both hands once again and, with gratefulness writ large and clear on every line of his gentle face, he asked for permission to be taken out. The Emperor escorted him to the door by which he was brought in. The court historian, Danishmand Khan, wrote: "A loyal face is of all spectacles the most spectacular. A light, it seemed, went out of the room as the Vizir was taken out by a team of eight stretcher-bearers".

The senior ladies of the harem watched the proceedings from behind the Gujarat silk and muslin screens. There arose a flutter of female excitement as the Chamberlain announced the conferment of titles, posts and cash awards for the four princes. Muiz-ud-Din was rechristened Jahandar Shah and posted as Governor of Thatta and Multan. Muhammad Azim became Azim-ush-Shan and given charge of Bengal and Bihar, the provinces he held with distinction for many years in the reign of Aurangzeb. The title of Rafi-ush-Shan was conferred on Rafi-ul-Qadr with Kabulistan as his fief. The youngest son, Khajista Akhtar, was honoured with the prestigious title Jahan Shah. He was designated Governor of Malwa.

A uniform *mansab* of thirty thousand *sawar* and twenty thousand *zat* was bestowed on each son. They were also extended the facility of governing their provinces by deputies. Shah Alam had learned well the lessons of history. The royal princes were kept under his eye in the capital. Neither were they given an opportunity to raise large armies disproportionate to their rank and requirements.

The Emperor and the princes repaired to their private apartments after saying the mid-day prayers at the royal mosque inside the fort. The puritanical norms of festivities set in the preceding reign were set aside. Members of the royal family and senior noblemen attended gala entertainments of dance and music for the next fifteen days, and thus came to be revived the "pleasant vices" Aurangzeb frowned upon. The *Aahl-i-Murad* were jubilant at this turn of fortune, and they pledged themselves to revive the forgotten art forms with or without assistance from the court. "Your own wish wish I thee in the tasks ahead", told Bahadur Shah to a descendant of Tansen when he called on the Emperor to seek approval for a festival of Hindustani dance and drama he planned to hold

in the capital in the week following Nauroz.

This festival, it is said, turned out to be a feast of music such as had not been heard in Agra since the days of Emperor Akbar. Aurangzeb was now no more than an unpleasant memory. The sedentary values he bent over backwards to nurture for nearly half a century were uprooted and trampled, as it were, under the nimble feet of elegant nautch-girls in less than a fortnight. Fed on the heady fare found in books of religion and high philosophy, Aurangzeb forgot that man was at the roots a pleasure-seeking creature. A few strong-willed individuals overcame their lusts and became saints, but a vast majority did their worldly journey yearning for one type of pleasure or another. This misreading of the human nature cost the austere Alamgir not only his ease, popularity and peace of the soul but also, in the last analysis, an empire infinitely rich in material and moral wealth. The elegance and golden cadences of poetry and other art forms are perhaps nearer the human heart than the sermons on life and death and the ultimate reality. The epicurean Babar Padshah founded an empire, Aurangzeb lost it.

On the seventeenth day, when the jingling of ankle bells had died down, letters were sent to Asad Khan and Zulfiqar Khan at Gwalior* offering amnesty and inviting them in very polite words to present themselves at the court. Asad Khan was particularly asked to bring along with him Zinat-un-Nissa Begum and other members of Aurangzeb and Azam's families. Similar letters were also sent to prominent noblemen in the Deccan**. In the words of Bahadur Shah, they were all loyal servants of the Mughals, innocent, high-minded and brave. "To punish them for not having defied the will of Muhammad Azam would be an act of heartless injustice", he told Munim Khan when the latter expressed doubt about their faithfulness. The letter sent to Asad Khan by the hand of a holy man, Zaqa-ul-Baqi, reflected in no small way the peaceful nature of Bahadur Shah and his strong desire to be a friend of all and the enemy of none. He wrote:

We have read with great interest the last will and testament of our most respected father, in particular the part where he described you as "the

*On his way to Agra, Muhammad Azam left at Gwalior all his women — except four concubines — and all his treasures in the charge of Asad Khan. Zulfiqar Khan fled to Gwalior after the defeat of Azam's army.

**The most important noblemen in the Deccan who had lent material and moral support to Muhammad Azam were Ghazi-ud-Din Khan Feroz Jang, his son Chin-Qitch Khan, and his cousin Muhammad Amin (Bahadur Khan).

strongest pillar of the Empire". His recommendation that your services as Prime Minister should be availed of by his successor is indeed worthy of consideration. Our admiration for your abilities as a soldier-statesman has been very high. The circumstances, it is realised, left you no alternative but to side with our brother, Muhammad Azam. We consider that support as a non-event.

In view of your services to the Mughal dynasty in general, and our heaven-residing father in particular, we invite you to present yourself at the court without fear. A high post, similar to one held by Yamin-ul-Mulk Asaf Khan in the reign of our grandfather, Emperor Shah Jahan, awaits you. We hope you will accept the offer and continue to guide the affairs of the Mughals with your stores of wisdom and experience.

There is in sisterly affection something which narrow souls cannot understand. Zeenat admired her brother, Azam, with touching devotion. We appreciate her single-minded support to his candidature for succession. We respect her feelings. Now that the divine dispenser has spoken in our favour, we would expect *hamshira* Zeenat to see the reality and consider us as her guardian. Honours, commensurate with her status, await her in Agra. We shall welcome her as a royal princess and extend to her the courtesies that her rank warrants. For us, the past is a chapter closed for ever. Her presence will heighten the dignity and lustre of our court. We invite her to come not as a supplicant, but as an honoured princess whose affection and wisdom will be the prop of our declining years.

This was a good letter—honest, straightforward, and well-worded. Zeenat-un-Nissa shed some tears while listening to it. Asad Khan did all that was possible to soften her stand. She agreed to travel to Agra, but insisted on her refusal to felicitate Bahadur Shah on his victory. The latter understood her reluctance, and observed: "Congratulations cease to be congratulations when uttered by unwilling tongues. Let her come. We shall honour her. We owe that to our *Walid-i-Bazurgwaram.*"

Withered and virtually wild in their attire, Asad Khan and his son, Zulfiqar Khan, "kissed the royal threshold" on 21 July, 1707. Both wore black scarves around their necks. When ushered in the Hall of Audience, Asad Khan made an eloquent speech in praise of God, in praise of the Emperor of Emperors Alamgir, and in praise of 'the wise and kind-hearted Bahadur Shah whose heart and mind are, by the grace of Allah, untouched by the mist of distrust and suspicion". When he ended with a couplet of Hafiz, lauding the virtues of trust and faith in the goodness of

man, the Emperor stepped down the throne, took off the black scarf from around the neck of the ageing Vizir, embraced him warmly, decorated him with the insignia of Vakil-i-Mulk, and announced conferment on him of a *mansab* of nine thousand.

The time seemed to stand still while a packed court waited for Asad Khan's acceptance of the offer. The latter began, as was his wont, with a recitation from the holy book and went on to express his gratitude for the honour done to him. A master that he was of the diplomatic art of lacing a yes with reasonable conditions, Asad Khan unrolled a long list of special honours and privileges enjoyed by Yamin-ul-Mulk, and said:

Your Majesty has conferred on me a post high in name but in contents meagre. The great Asaf Khan was bigger than any office entrusted to him. His aura was lustrous, his prestige sky-high. No duty, howsoever small or great, fell outside his charge. We smaller men would be ill-advised to emulate him, and should be content with less high-sounding and more precise duties to perform. A simple Vizir would satisfy my *amourpropre*. This said, I shall gladly accept what is offered. Slaves cannot be choosers. My services are at Your Majesty's disposal.

The implication of Asad Khan's remarks was not lost on the Emperor. It was apparent that Munim Khan, who held the office of Prime Minister, was a thorn in his side. Bahadur Shah, always at pains to find a *via-media*, expressed his pleasure at Asad Khan's readiness to "trust my judgment" and, I in appreciation, gave him the title Nizam-ul-Mulk Asaf-ud-Dowla — an appellation more prestigious than that conferred on Munim Khan. The Emperor failed to realise that there was place only for one man at the top of the official hierarchy. He tried to please both, and succeeded only in further stoking the fires of jealousy.

The black scarf around the neck of Zulfiqar Khan was untied by Jahandar Shah. He was appointed Mir Bakshi with the title Amir-ul-Umra Nusrat Jang and a *mansab* of six thousand. The audience ended with smiles sans cheer and prayers sans fervour. Bahadur Shah lost the first round to the softness of his heart.

Both Munim Khan and Asad Khan thought they were given the second place. The affairs of court came virtually to a standstill amidst confusion with regard to number one. Bahadur Shah realised the mistake and, with the help of Munim Khan, found "cogent reasons" for advising Asad Khan to proceed to Delhi for rest. Zeenat-un-Nissa went with him. Her privy purse was doubled, and a villa was assigned to her for residence on the

bank of the Jamuna. Bahadur Shah never saw her again.

The reason why monarchy, howsoever despotic, was popular in medieval times was that it was an intelligible form of government. The mass of population, irrespective of religion, understood it; they knew of no other. Though Rajput monarchy was slightly more democratic than the Mughal, yet both leaned heavily on the personality of the monarch. Rajasthan of the days of Ranas Sanga and Pratap was different from what it came to be in the days of Rana Amar Singh (Mewar) and Maharaja Ajit Singh (Marwar). They were both mediocrities, lacking the guts and stamina of their ancestors. Still the people adored them for their virtues and paid no heed to their weaknesses.

Akbar's Hindustan was similarly different from that of Aurangzeb and Bahadur Shah. The people by and large adored Akbar. They also admired, to a lesser degree, Aurangzeb and Bahadur Shah. Though they were comparatively pygmies in stature, possessing neither the charisma nor the innate wisdom of the Great Mughal, yet there were no popular uprisings to unseat them and put in their place kings with greater awareness of the needs of the people. There were no wars of liberation in medieval days, only wars of conquest. Expansion was an end by itself, and the right to defend only a corollary to that national aspiration.

Rana Amar Singh had been the ruler of Mewar for eight years when Aurangzeb died in 1707. Ajit Singh, son of Raja Jaswant Singh, was in his swaddling clothes when Aurangzeb, upset by Maharatta advances, broke off the campaign in Marwar and left for the Deccan in 1683. Alamgir spent the rest of his life in the zig-zags of the Western Ghats fighting, with every resource available, to achieve his ambition of being the unchallenged ruler of the entire peninsula. He did succeed in conquering the principal strongholds of the Maharattas, as also of the Shiite Sultanates of Bijapur and Golcaňda, but the price he paid for what has been called a magnificent folly was quite in disproportion to the gains thereof. The north languished in maladministration while the south went through paroxysms of economic and political convulsions because of what looked like a never-ending war. Opposition to the Mughals gathered momentum in Rajasthan and also in the Punjab and Malwa. The symbol of a resurgent Marwar, Ajit Singh was twenty-eight when Aurangzeb died. Married to a daughter of Rana Amar Singh, he came to represent what the bard Shankar Dass called "of the spirit of Sangram and the will of Pratap". He reconquered the territories ceded to the Mughals, ousted by force the imperial representatives from Jodhpur, rebuilt the temples desecrated and pulled down by Aurangzeb, and adduced to

himself the full sovereign rights of a Rajput Maharaja.

Kingship would not be what it was in the middle ages if it were not vain. Bahadur Shah, essentially a man of peace, could not be peaceful in all circumstances. He could ignore the developments in Rajasthan at his own peril. Munim Khan urged him to defuse the danger before it impinged on the imperial authority. The Emperor led an expedition to Amber (Jaipur) early in 1708 ostensibly to settle an intra-family dispute between two sections of the Kachwahas, but in fact to use Jaipur as a base for advance on Marwar. The traditionally friendly Jaipur princes offered no resistance, and let the state be formally annexed to the Empire. The name of Jaipur was changed to Islamabad, and the entire administration was taken over by Mughal officers. The deposed ruler, Bijau Singh, was content to receive for his mother a gift of jewellery valued at rupees one hundred thousand. Self-respect had ceased to be the final good in Amber.

After only two days' stay in the capital, Bahadur Shah moved towards Jodhpur. The order of the day to the commanders was: "To Jodhpur with full speed, block all roads of exit for Ajit Singh and his companions in arms. Our aim is to establish the authority of our arms. The pretender must be humbled. The mighty Allah is our guide and protector. Fear is the worst of all evils, push on with faith and courage".

The providence read this order, and laughed; it had different directives to carry out. Two stages from Islamabad, there came a messenger from Agra with the news that Prince Kam Baksh was planning to leave Bijapur for the north after assuming to himself the insignia of Emperor. Bad news seldom comes alone. Yet another messenger came from Ajmer with a communication from the Governor that Rana Amar Singh was known to have mobilised all his forces for assistance to Maharaja Ajit Singh. The note further informed that all the Raja's women and all his jewellery and other material wealth had already been sent to the safety of strongholds in the hills in anticipation of a long drawn-out war. Bahadur Shah was in a dilemma. To wage a long war in Rajasthan was to assist Kam Baksh in his obvious design to capture the throne, and to pull out from Rajasthan was to own defeat to his vassals. A way had to be found to save these unpalatable eventualities. Munim Khan came to the Emperor's rescue. Two letters were quickly drafted, one for Ajit Singh and the other for his arch-supporter, Durga Dass. The letter to the Maharaja said, in part:

We have no intention to annex your territories. At the same time, we cannot let our territories be encroached upon by anybody. We decided to

march to Marwar to enforce respect for our rights and our status as per treaties signed by your ancestors. We, on our part, stand by the commitment not to dislodge you from the *gaddi* provided you announce unconditional surrender and acknowledge the Mughal suzerainty.

We expect a formal reply to this offer of friendship within two full weeks. Else, we shall have no alternative but to enforce by force our rights and privileges.

The bluff worked. Ajit Singh and his counsellors, in particular Durga Dass, saw in this offer an opportunity to save Marwar for the time from the fate that had befallen Amber. Rana Amar Singh, they felt, could only help prolong a conflict, not win it. The odds were heavily against them. Wisdom and courage are seldom found together. A letter, bearing the seal of Ajit Singh, was sent to the imperial camp within the stipulated period. Bahadur Shah was jubilant. He invited the Maharaja to present himself at the camp court on 27 February.

The Maharaja and four members of his entourage came to the camp, their hands bound with black handkerchiefs. They did the obeisance as per Mughal protocol, made symbolic presents of money and horses, and offered a formal submission acknowledging the imperial monarch as the overlord of Marwar. Bahadur Shah accepted the gifts, and returned the compliment by bestowing upon Ajit Singh the robes of high honour, as also a *mansab* of seven thousand. The four sons of Ajit Singh were also given *mansabs* ranging from five to fifteen hundred.

It has been said not truly, but with a possible approximation to truth, that in the Mughal times every ruler had a disloyal son, brother or wife. As Amar Singh prepared to halt Mughal aggression, his brother, Bakht Singh, led a twelve-man delegation to Bahadur Shah, offering cooperation in defeating the "mad designs" of the Rana. The Emperor chose not to divulge his hand, and made sure by rich rewards and robes of ermine and silk that the rift between brothers did not end in the near future. A *mansab* of four thousand was conferred on Bakht Singh with a promise of greater honours after "the nose of Amar Singh was rubbed in dust". On his part, Bakht Singh undertook to keep a close watch on the movements of his "unscrupulously over-ambitious brother" and to apprise the Emperor of the right moment to strike.

Though he feigned to be heading for Udaipur via Ajmer, Bahadur Shah had no intention to be involved in a war in Rajasthan before Kam Baksh was rubbed out. After a three-day stay in Ajmer, made memorable by presentation of offerings at the holy Dargah valued at approximately

half a million rupees, Bahadur Shah announced his decision to "punish Amar Singh after the threat held out by Kam Baksh is fully countered". Only a few of the top commanders knew of the Emperor's intentions beforehand. By and large, the men and officers of the army received the order with a degree of disquiet. Aurangzeb was trapped to death in the south, they recalled, and were hesitant to believe that Bahadur Shah, with all the handicaps of age and comparative inexperience, could overcome the hazards the Deccan held out. In their assessment, it would be easier to demolish Kam Baksh this side of the Narbada than after crossing that river of fate.

Before leaving Ajmer, Bahadur Shah sent a letter to Rana Amar Singh, asking him to refrain from use of force against the Mughal representatives in Rajasthan. "We would welcome your friendship, and to that end invite you to come in person for an audience. Your safety is guaranteed. Courtesies and honours warranted by your status will be extended to you and your entourage. In the name of peace, we expect a positive response to this offer," wrote Bahadur Shah in his own handwriting. His need for peace was desperate. Kam Baksh conditioned this thinking.

The proud Sisodia gave no direct reply to this approach. However, he sent to Bahadur Shah twenty-one gold coins — a traditional Rajput way of acknowledging a letter from an equal. At the same time, he fled to the hills, leaving the Mughals in no doubt about his plan of operations.

The story of Bahadur Shah's march to the Deccan and the battle against Kam Baksh near Hyderabad has already been told in the preceding chapter. Here it only needs to be stated that after crossing the Narbada on 17 May 1708, the Emperor made many a genuine effort, by letter and by special messenger, to dissuade his brother from the path of confrontation, but to no avail. The battle took place on 13 January 1709. The larger number and the longer purse won the day. Kam Baksh possessed neither the money nor manpower to counter effectively Bahadur Shah's 140,000 horsemen, 180,000 infantry and millions of rupees carried in a hundred chests on the backs of a battery of fierce-looking elephants. He and his son, Bariqullah (who was in the same howdah with his father) were captured as the sun began to descend behind the thick forest in the west. His other two sons, bearing wounds in all parts of their bodies, were also taken prisoner.

The next morning, Kam Baksh and his sons were brought in *palkis* to the presence of the Emperor. Tears, not words, was the medium Bahadur Shah used to express his anguish. Liberal privy purses were announced

for the wives of Kam Baksh and their offspring. The royal surgeons were asked to "bring herbs from the Himalayas if need be" to heal the wounds of his brother and nephews. All efforts to save Kam Baksh failed. He died in the early hours of the next day. The funeral was attended by Bahadur Shah and his four sons — a gesture that, according to Danishmand Khan, could not but "please the gods in heaven, angels in space, and good men everywhere". The bodies of the princes were sent to Delhi for burial in the compound of Humayun's tomb.

Kam Baksh was forty-three at the time of his death. No man can be a superstar in all parts. He fought like a hero, but that did not indemnify the blemishes in his character. A voluptuary, he took into his harem every woman that caught his eye. There were no less than five hundred concubines in his camp when he left Bijapur to stake his claim for the throne. The most notable of them, Mehar Surat, an Armenian of mixed parentage, was described by a Portuguese trader as "a goddess of love come to earth to exhibit in person the divine craftsmanship of nature". She was one of the four women whom Kam Baksh took with him to the battlefield against Bahadur Shah. Instructions to her bodyguard were that in no circumstances should she fall in the hands of the enemy. "Send her soul to the abode in heaven if need be", Kam Baksh told the eunuch Abdul Hamid after he donned the armour on the fateful day. His last words to Mehar were: "You are my strongest weapon. I shall not be defeated, wait for me. Khuda Hafiz". Mehar waited in vain. Kam Baksh did not return. What happened to her is not known. She was not one of those whom Bahadur Shah allotted privy purses.

According to eye-witness accounts, Kam Baksh fought gallantly against insuperable odds. When his elephant was surrounded by a contingent of Zulfiqar Khan's Afghans, he let loose on them a rain of arrows that took many lives and sent many more crying aloud for help. Three quiver-loads of arrows were discharged by him within the space of an hour. When he had no more arrows to shoot, he threw his two bows to the shouting Afghans, and said: "I shall now fight with God-force". He was captured shortly afterwards, bleeding virtually from every pore. Historians are unanimous that in defeat he rose to his highest stature. How true: No man can be a superstar or a devil in all parts. Ambition made him a companion of folly, and passion of high temper. The result was a defeat that no one lamented. The youngest and the best-loved son of Aurangzeb will be remembered only for the atrocities he committed in the name of justice and security.

Bahadur Shah left Aurangabad for Delhi on 1 February 1709. As if

aware that he would never come back to the south again, he visited before leaving all the landmarks of Hyderabad — palaces, mosques, gardens, tombs, holy shrines—in the company of Zulfiqar Khan and other senior noblemen. A day earlier, he prayed at the tomb of his father, and also made a round of the battlefield where the last challenge to his sovereignty was successfully met. Like a child, he went from one site to another wrapped, as it were, in wonderment of the benevolence of nature. When he reached the slightly raised terrain where he stood when the victory drums were sounded he came down the horse and bent his knees in prayer. The whole entourage followed suit in what was to be a Mughal Emperor's last conversation with God from the soil of Deccan. A heart-catching era of north-south conflict seemed to have come to an end. The Emperor rode away in slow trot—a measured, majestic step to ward off evil thoughts and induce hope for the future. Adieu, Deccan! Here was a turning point in history that went unnoticed by the bulk of official and unofficial scribes. A Maharatta bard, Rup Narolkar, was perhaps the only one to notice the poignancy in Bahadur Shah's departure: "O' aggression, where is thy victory? O' armed might, where is thy honour?" he wrote in deep disdain after capturing in verse the "victorious defeats" of the Emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb. A silence descended on Hyderabad as the sound of hoofs of the Mughal horses was heard no more, Bahadur Shah won the throne; the House of Timur lost it.

In slow, leisurely marches, Bahadur Shah reached Agra in March 1710. The capital welcomed him with drums, trumpets and *shahnais*, not prayers, alms-giving and unceasing readings from the Quran. In three years since the death of Alamgir, religion gradually became what it should be — man's personal equation with the Creator. The change was silent, but noticeable. Many western travellers, in particular the Dutch and Portuguese traders, saw in the transformation a new hope, a new prospect for the success of their missions. Keen to keep on the right side of the powerful Syeds of Burha, two of whom (Hassan and Hussain) fought with him against Muhammad Azam in 1707, Bahadur Shah issued on the second day a proclamation, a la Aurangzeb, ascribing his success to the helping hand of the almighty Allah and pledging himself to follow the path of Islam with deep devotion. To him religion was a means, not an end in itself. The Shaikh-ul-Islam, Maulana Ghulam Ahmad Jilani, encouraged by the proclamation, suggested imposition of discriminatory taxes "for the benefit of the faithful", and he received the reply: "Discriminatory impositions are like worms on vegetables. I will not pollute the means of our survival". The Shaikh quoted from the edicts of

Alamgir to justify his plea, but Bahadur Shah cut him short by the words of Hazrat Amir Khusrau that "to discriminate on the basis of religion is to abuse religion". The Shaikh did not give in, and suggested that a conference of the *ulema* should be called for a clear verdict on the issue. Bahadur Shah parried: "Debates confuse, not clarify. I will not tax non-Muslims alone. The law of reason is on my side". The Shaikh realized that the old order had lost its sanction, and that the new ruler was cast in a mould different from that of his father.

Chapter 5

COMMUNAL EXPLOSION

THE comparative liberalism of Bahadur Shah did not, however, strike a sympathetic chord in the hearts of Rajput racists. During the Emperor's absence in the Deccan, the ultra-nationalists Amar Singh (Mewar), Ajit Singh (Marwar) and Jai Singh* (Amber) banded themselves together by oath and pledges in the name of patriotism to oust the Mughals from Rajasthan. The imperial representatives in Jaipur and Jodhpur were attacked in force and compelled to vacate their charges unconditionally. The forts were cleaned with water from the Ganga, and the three chiefs held *yagnas* in their respective capitals and invoked their family deities for help in upholding their sovereignty.

An attack on Ajmer by the combined Rajput forces was, however, repulsed by Shujat Khan with heavy losses on both sides. The report of this "desecration of the holy city" upset Bahadur Shah, and he ordered no other than the highest-ranking nobleman of the realm, Asad Khan, to bring peace to the region. The Governor of Oudh, Chin Qitch Khan (Khan-i-Dauran) and many other experienced generals were asked to proceed to Ajmer and help the Vakil-i-Mulk to punish the trouble-makers. A massive Mughal force, comprising among other paraphernalia of desert warfare many divisions of the specially trained camel and elephant corps, fanned into Rajasthan from the base camp at Ajmer. Jaipur and Jodhpur were recaptured without much difficulty, though the roving Rajput tribesmen inflicted fairly heavy losses on the invaders.

As soon as the Mughal commanders had stationed themselves in key

*Bahadur Shah took Ajit Singh (Jodhpur) and Jai Singh (Jaipur) with him when he left for the Deccan in 1709, but the two escaped after crossing the Ganga, returned to Rajasthan, and made a common cause with Rana Amar Singh (Udaipur) for overthrow of Mughal overlordship.

strongholds, there came a daring night attack by Jai Singh on the fort at Jaipur. Waves after waves of Rajput desperadoes climbed the ramparts at the dead of night, disarmed the surprised garrison, and put to the sword all those who chose to offer resistance. Among the slain were Syed Hussain Khan and his two brothers—trio respected not only for their high lineage, but also for their administrative and diplomatic skills. Within the space of one hour the historic fort was reoccupied by Jai Singh. The bulk of the Mughal army fled in panic. The Subedar and the Mughal commander of the citadel were found hiding behind sacks of foodgrains in the store-room. They offered no resistance, and handed over to their captors the keys of the treasure-vaults and other rooms where lay in chests the jewellery and ancient art pieces for which Amber was famous.

When brought to the presence of a jubilant Jai Singh, they stood silent, heads bent in pathetic helplessness, waiting to hear what the Rajput chief had to say. In a mood of victorious benevolence, the Raja ordered the guards to "open the door of the cage and let the rats go". They were pushed out of the fort into the darkness of a night that promised no safety. One of them was killed in an ambush by a party of tribal rough-necks; the other managed somehow to reach a Mughal camp on the border of Marwar.

The report of this assault upset Bahadur Shah. Essentially a man of peace, the near-rout of a part of the Mughal army induced in him a strong desire to come to terms with the militant Rajas of Rajasthan. He shared his thoughts with Munim Khan who counselled a gradual approach to that goal. The equation between the two was rooted in complete mutual trust, so much so that never did Munim Khan say one thing and Bahadur Shah another. The arrogance of kingship had, in this case, learnt to submit to the wisdom of experience. Bahadur Shah decided to maintain Mughal presence in Marwar and Amber till such time as the negotiations for a settlement could be conducted from a position of strength.

Meanwhile, Mahabat Khan, son of Munim Khan, was sent to Ajmer for monitoring developments in the three Rajput states from that point of vantage. Reinforcements were also sent to the three commands lest their morale sagged to a point of despondency. The things began to look up, and the Emperor, in consultation with Munim Khan, contemplated yet another offensive against the combined forces of Rajas Ajit Singh and Jai Singh. The plan failed to take off because of developments in the Punjab. On 16 May 1710, the Governor of Sirhind, the eighty-year-old Wazir Khan, was killed in an insurrection led by the militant Sikh leader, Banda

Bahadur*. The four-day sack of Sirhind and the adjoining areas was a threat to Mughal authority that could not be ignored. The Sikhs were on the rampage—killing, looting, and perpetrating such acts of brutality against women and children as led the Emperor to recall the bulk of imperial forces from Rajasthan and deploy them against the Sikh challenge in the north-west.

The only infallible criterion of success in an act of vegeance, according to vulgar judgment, is the capacity to kill and scatter ruin. Banda, a high-powered extremist of fanatical religious beliefs, was out to avenge the slaying of the sons of Guru Gobind Singh** and the result was a mass communal conflagration that at one stage turned the Punjab and parts of Malwa into a choppy sea of untold sufferings and sorrow. The Sikhs put up a spirited fight against the vastly superior Mughal forces, but in the end they had to submit to the logic of numbers and the argument of deadly guns.

The diplomatic skill of Mahabat Khan turned out to be of infinite value in this crisis. He succeeded in convincing Jai Singh and Ajit Singh of the benefits of friendship with the imperial power. The two accompanied him to Ajmer***, and presented themselves at the court on 21 June 1710—not as supplicants for peace but as rulers of friendly states pledged to the principle of independence on the basis of equality. They presented to the Emperor two hundred gold coins and rupees two thousand each, and Bahadur Shah reciprocated by presenting them with

*The tenth and last Guru of the Sikhs, Gobind Singh, made a common cause with Bahadur Shah in the war of succession following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. He fought with distinction in the battle near Agra against Muhammad Azam. Bahadur Shah presented him a jewelled scarf, in recognition of his heroism. The Guru accompanied Bahadur Shah to the Deccan in 1708. His death in November 1708, at Nader on the bank of the Godavari has been explained in more than one story, the most plausible being that he was stabbed in sleep by a grandson of Panda Khan whom the sixth Guru, Har Gobind, killed in a fray.

Following the death of Guru Gobind Singh, the mantle of leadership (not that of a Guru) fell on Banda Bahadur (brave soldier). His original name was Narayan Dass, son of one Ram Deo Rajput of Rajaurigarh of Kashmir. He was brave, fearless and vengeful. Before he was captured and killed in the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar he brought nearly the whole of Punjab and parts of Malwa under the Sikh rule.

**The two sons of Guru Gobind Singh (1675-1708)—Fateh Singh and Zorawar Singh —were executed by orders of Wazir Khan. Their throats were cut in the presence of their grandmother, Mata Gujari, who fell dead on the spot. Banda Bahadur took a pledge to avenge this barbaric act.

***Bahadur Shah travelled to Ajmer to receive the two Rajas formally at the court. Both Jai Singh and Ajit Singh refused to make the journey to Agra.

robes of honour, bejewelled daggers and gold belts studded with diamonds. Here was a truce of necessity that deceived nobody. The Mughals welcomed it for it gave them a chance to put the bulk of their forces against the Sikhs. The Rajputs were happy because it gave them time to prepare for what Colonel Todd called the last war to end war.

Those in search of revenge are seldom in need of pretexts. They are not motivated by reason, but by high passion. The sufferings undergone by the Sikhs and their spiritual leaders since Guru Arjan Dev preferred death to servitude in the reign of Jahangir was enough reason for Banda Bahadur to embark on a ruthless campaign to make life hell for all those who in any way abetted "crimes against the Sikhs". His fanaticism was uncompromising, his rules of war relentless. Some of his followers believed that he was Guru Gobind Singh himself in disguise, others credited him with magical powers such as could "make arrows ineffective and turn cannon-balls away from their set course". When he appeared in the vicinity of Delhi in 1709 wearing a yellow *chola* and a bright red *kalghi* in his pale blue turban, the people gathered around him in thousands to listen to "his call, his message and his promise of a new earth, new heaven". The fact that he bore a marked resemblance to the Guru in size, colour, the shape of head and the general built of the body made the credulous wonder if in death the Guru had come to a new life in a new garb. Devotion to him gathered weight like a snow-ball, and within weeks an army of eighty thousand well-armed men, drawn mostly from the peasant classes, was ready to lay down their lives at his command.

The response to Banda's call for "a new order, a new dispensation" was almost miraculous. Gifts of money came to him from all over Punjab and parts of the present state of Uttar Pradesh. Women gave him their jewellery and men whatever valuables they possessed. He planned the future not with the help of astronomers and flatterers, but with the help of an inner voice that, he said, kept him awake at nights and allowed him no rest during the hours of sunshine. The past, he affirmed time and again, was of little use to him except that it reminded him of "the scores to settle and the vengeances to wreak". When he spoke, his voice throbbed with emotion, and a light shone in his eyes that kept his listeners spell-bound. All others were dumb when he spoke. There is in high passion, whatever its form, something which narrow souls cannot understand, much less appreciate. They merely stand aghast, awe-stricken, ready to obey. This is leadership at its best. Banda Bahadur rode a wave of high popular acclaim with a measure of impressive dignity that came with increasing

self-confidence. There was a tendency among his followers to style him a Guru, but he firmly rejected that appellation. "I am a servant of the Panth, no spiritual teacher", he told an old, grey-haired woman come to "kiss the feet of the Guru".

Banda was hardly forty when destiny called him to the high task of waging a war against a strong imperial power. He was ruthless, callous and uncompromising in the discharge of what he believed was his mission. To judge such men is beyond the capacity of lesser individuals. Their worlds are different, their perspectives not easy to fathom. Some call their perceptions egoistic madness, others ennobling revelations. Either description, it seems, is only partly true.

In his monumental work, *History of the Sikhs*, Khushwant Singh tends to regard the insurrection triggered by Banda as the peasants' revolt. This reading is correct in that the bulk of the Sikhs in Punjab were peasants, and that the policies of Aurangzeb and his representatives in that border state had left them unhappy both economically and politically. But it may not be right to disassociate from the uprising the element of communal passion aroused by Alamgir's narrow-minded bigotry in general and atrocities against the Sikhs in particular. To give the insurrection a purely economic content may not be fair either to Banda or the Sikh community as a whole. They were hell-bent, broadly speaking, on reversing by force the illiberal religious trends initiated by Aurangzeb.

After reaching surreptitiously a village forty miles from Delhi early in 1709, Banda made plans to do what he had sworn on the holy *Granth* to do, viz., to avenge the slaying of the two sons of Guru Gobind Singh. His army of fifty thousand death-defying desperadoes sped to Sirhind after sacking *en route* all towns and villages that did not show sympathy to their cause. An average man is, by and large, a religious animal. The call of the insurgents for revenge, on the one hand, and the cry of the privileged classes to resist aggression, on the other, resulted virtually in an explosion that rocked northern Hindustan. First Sirhind, then Thanesar and all towns between the rivers Sutlej and Jamuna were plundered till there was nothing left to plunder.

The Mughal *Faujdars* put up only token resistance at some places. Once the sword-arm of the Mughal court, the nobility was now no more than a decadent lot interested only in their own survival. They fled to places of safety with their families as the news came of Banda's advance. The demoralised officials, like dilapidated houses, leant on one another in the panic that spread from Lahore to Sonepat. Even the great Asad Khan, Vakil-i-Mulk, did nothing to stop the erosion of confidence. He

took refuge in the fort and, as a measure of security, ordered the beards of all guardsmen to be shaved off! The once sturdy Mughal minds had over the years lost their strength and dynamism. The lucrative business of sycophancy and corruption had sapped their patriotic ardour as also their will to fight. The decay, when it sets in, tends to distribute itself equally among all sections of society.

After showing the Sikh flag in Sultanpur, Jullundur and the adjoining areas, Banda moved on to Saharanpur and Jalalabad across the Jamuna but there his forces, now swollen to nearly eighty thousand, met stiff resistance from the Afghan commanders. The cry of Islam in danger aroused the Muslim masses from their apathy and they, despite suffering heavy losses in men and property, succeeded in forcing Banda to withdraw to Punjab. Repulsed, the Sikh contingents sought compensation in going on the rampage once again in the Doab territory. The acts of vengeance committed by them against innocent people have been described by historians as "abominations that could not but be an affront to the Creator". Wheels of fire were said to have been set up in villages, on which were bound men and women whose only crime was that they belonged to a different religion. A wave of horror swept through Punjab at these excesses. Bahadur Shah could maintain a posture of peace no longer. He called a halt to the fighting in Rajasthan and took a vow at the holy shrine in Ajmer that he would not be content with anything less than the total demolition of the war machine Banda and his followers had built. All leading *mansabdars* were invited to join in what the official proclamation described as a *jehad* in defence of Mughal values and traditions.

The aura of spirituality around Banda gave him both power and prestige. To all intents and purposes, he became a Guru in the popular mind. With increase of influence, the greater became the chances of its abuse. The capture of Lahore had been on Banda's card for a long time. Now was the time, he reckoned, for the realization of his dream. He ordered his forces to converge on that city from all sides. The operation was so well planned and coordinated that nearly sixty thousand Sikhs, equipped with small and medium-range guns, reached the Shalimar Garden, four miles from Lahore, within twenty days. The Governor of Lahore, Islam Khan, drew courage from a position of extreme desperation, mobilised all able-bodied men for defence of the capital, stirred religious passions through prayers and invocations to Allah for help from the pulpits of all mosques in the city and, lastly, he issued a proclamation in the name of the Emperor, asking the population to join in a crusade

against the forces of infidelity and lawlessness. Lahore, it is said, rose to a man to meet the challenge. Heavy fighting took place in the eastern suburbs of the city. The defenders cast caution aside, and jumped into the fray with fearsome shouts of "Ya Ali" on their lips. The Sikh forces responded with an equal muster of ferocious fanaticism, but their resolution wilted as Islam Khan himself took the field at the head of ten thousand fresh soldiers. The bewildered Banda ordered withdrawal to the base camp fifteen miles from the garden. The retreat, like most retreats, soon became a stampede in which no less than ten thousand Sikhs lost their lives.

This was the first major defeat suffered by Banda. He reckoned the setback not as a warning against but a divine call to renewed effort for "the demolition of a state built on the bodies of the followers of the Panth". The people of Lahore were jubilant over their victory. In a message read from the holy podium of the Shahi Masjid, the Governor said the victory was "a glittering prize to all those who brought into play stout hearts and sharp swords". The rejoicings were, however, held on a subdued note. The number of young "martyrs" in the city ran into a little less than five figures.

War is far from being an exact science. Victories cannot be calculated in algebraical equations, nor can they be determined on the basis of readings by the computer. The hand of God is dominant in the result of an armed conflict. Banda was so convinced of the righteousness of his cause that he failed even to imagine that the deity could unhand him in a conflict on which, he believed, depended the future of the Sikh faith. Obsessed with this conviction, he regrouped his force, gave sermons to his followers on the merits of death on the battlefield, and made plans to deliver yet another attack on Lahore. Replying to a note of scepticism struck by a disciple, he remarked: "If Providence will have one victor, well, Providence may select me for the honour. We shall fight. Providence is my friend".

The second assault on Lahore met with the same fate as the first. Islam Khan screwd his courage to the sticking-place, rallied his men as before for "the defence of our religion, our Empire and our honour", and sent an urgent submission to Bahadur Shah before taking the field. He asked the Emperor for neither money nor reinforcements, but for adequate compensation for those "who may not return to their homes again". He wrote:

They are all *Mujahids* under my command. Death has no fear for them.

Their one aim is to protect Islam from being trampled underfoot by non-believers. The greatness of the Empire is to them sacrosanct and a source of pride. Insha Allah, we shall repulse Banda again. We seek Your Majesty's blessings and good wishes. For many of us there may be no next day. We offer you our respectful salutations on this fateful morning. May Allah protect you to rule over the Empire till eternity. Our trust in Him is deep and boundless.

Before this communication reached the imperial camp, the Sikh attack was beaten back with heavy losses. For once, Banda's candles were all out, and he did not know where to go and what to do next. He and his followers fled to the hills, their eyes set on the fort of Lohgarh, a small-size citadel known for its near-impregnable defences. Bahadur Shah read the communication, withheld the swell of water in his eyes, and ordered there and then a payment of rupees one thousand to the family of each soldier who might have fallen in the battle.

Bahadur Shah was a host of characters in himself—kind-hearted, callous, pleasure-loving, ascetic, generous, God-fearing, liberal, timid, fearless in face of danger and, above all, a good man the constitution of whose mind could be read easily from the cut of his face. According to Danishmand Khan, "to see His Majesty is to respect him, and respect him for all time". Age did not dim the friendly glow on his visage. It is, however, an irony of nature that goodness and disappointment always go together.

"The victories of a reckless ruler are worse than the defeats of a careful king", wrote Shaikh Sa'adi in one of his immortal verses. How true! Banda's earlier successes against the Mughals became a dust-heap of disappointment after the second rout in Lahore. Had he moved with a greater caution, he might well have consolidated his hold over a part of Punjab and used that territory as a base for hit-and-run attacks against the neighbouring Mughal provinces. The hills gave him comparative safety, no more. Lohgarh shielded him for a while from Bahadur Shah's wrath, but it could not serve as the nucleus for a Sikh homeland.

Defeated men tend to placate their injured ego with big talk and ballyhoo that deceives nobody but themselves. Shut up in Lohgarh, Banda assumed the airs of sovereignty, struck token coinage in his name, created a hierarchy of Sikh nobility, gave away token honours and *khilats*, styled himself the "True Emperor", and held weekly *darbars* to stress his independence. In short, he engaged himself in flaunting absolute power till he became an absolute swashbuckler.

The time was running out fast for him and his coterie of self-styled Sirdars. Bahadur Shah was on the move at the head of a massive *lashkar* of nearly a hundred thousand men. Asad Khan (Delhi), Khan-i-Dauran (Oudh) and Munim Khan joined the Emperor at Sonepat on 22 October 1710, and a vast concourse of men, horses and elephants marched westwards to underline the supremacy of Mughal authority. The imperial *subedars*, *kotwals*, *muftis*, *naib Bakshis* and other lesser officials, who had fled their posts in the wake of Sikh successes, gradually returned to the imperial camp with assurances of loyalty and service to the throne. Bahadur Shah condoned their sins of weakness, restored them to their posts, and thus helped repair the unity which the initial Sikh onslaught had to some extent disrupted.

What had for the time quietened Banda gave Bahadur Shah fire. Taking full advantage of the Sikh leader's two defeats at the hands of Islam Khan, the Emperor spread terror in the hearts of the foes by a show of armed might the like of which the Punjab and the Doab had seldom seen before. He stormed into Thanesar on 13 November, and waited there for a few days to gather news about the wandering Sikh forces. The main Sikh camp was located, the imperialists came to know, close to the eastern and western Jamuna canals, and that the adjoining fort, occupied by Banda and his family, was protected by a massive wall built all around it. The military genius of Zulfiqar Khan saw in these stone walls a doom for the besieged, a certain compulsion for surrender if all routes to and from the castle were sealed. The stratagem worked as planned. Lest they drove the angels of good luck from their door, the Mughal commanders used utmost secrecy in deployment of their forces in a way that "not a whiff of air could enter the fort without their nod of assent".

The ploy yielded quick results. The stocks of food and armament in the fort were hardly sufficient to last for more than a few weeks. Munim Khan, his son Mahabat Khan, Afzal Khan, Rustamdil Khan and the nominal supremo of the assault force, Prince Rafi-ush-Shan, waited patiently for the expected eventuality of the garrison hazarding a battle in the open. Hunger and desperation are companions in misery. On the morning of 4 December when frost lay thick on the ground, the beleaguered Sikhs rushed out in a bold bid to break the blockade. The result was a massacre of nearly fifteen thousand Sikhs before the sun raised its head above the surrounding hills and witnessed a spectacle too grim for words. The shrieks of the dying and the shouts of those out to slaughter mingled in a bedlam that sored both the ear and the eye. It was a rough day, the roughest in many years. The time, however, cut through it very

quickly. By noon—a span of period that looked like a fleeting moment —the Sikh force, or what remained of it, fled in complete disorder to the inaccessibility of the inner ranges.

Munim Khan was the first to enter the fort. A frantic search was made for Banda, but there was no trace of him or any member of his family. His escape was a mystery that anguished Bahadur Shah and all those who were engaged in the blockade. The how and when of this flight have remained unsolved. Some of his devout followers believed that Banda, like Shivaji, possessed magical powers, "There was nothing he could not do"—this is the refrain of a popular folk song sung to this day on sacred Sikh days in the Punjab.

Shut up in measureless disappointment, Munim Khan died shortly afterwards. It is said that Bahadur Shah hurled abuse at him when the Minister brought to him the news of the escape—an insult that went through the ageing Vizir like a razor. He never recovered from the effect of this ill-treatment.

Bahadur Shah was, by constitution, not a suspecting individual unlike his father, he did not see a snake lurking in grass at every corner. But in Banda's escape he read many a complicity, many a plot, and many a confusing possibility of disloyalty at the top. The son of Raja of Nahan was one of the suspects who allegedly facilitated Banda's get-away. He was arrested, brought to Delhi in a cage constructed specially to serve as Banda's cell, and kept a low-class prisoner till he was released by Jahandar Shah in 1713.

Rustamdil Khan was honoured by Bahadur Shah for his part in capturing the fort of Lohgarh. Not only did the Khan look like a dauntless soldier from top to toe; he bore fearlessness in his eye, his manner and his tongue. The Emperor gave him gifts of the highest order, raised his *mansab* to seven thousand, and allotted him hereditary *jagirs* in Punjab and Oudh. In the Mughal times those who gained royal favour all of a sudden more often than not fell from grace with equal suddenness. The young and jealous eye of Muhammad Amin Khan, a daring commander of high ambition and loyalty, unearthed a plot that left no room for doubt that Banda Bahadur escaped with the connivance of no other than Rustamdil Khan; it was also established that the latter received a bribe of rupees one million for his part in the Sikh leader's vanishing act.

Bahadur Shah was beside himself with rage when evidence in support of these charges was produced before him. The General was arrested, chained hand-and-foot, and thrown in a solitary dungeon at the back of the Lohgarh fort. His honours were impounded and his properties

confiscated. A greater ignominy could not have befallen on the conqueror of Lohgarh. Within six months, the Khan was back in favour, due principally to the intercession of Mehar Parwar Begum, one of whose nieces, Asiya Khanum, was married to Rustamdil Khan. The commandment of the country's rules was in the reigns of most Mughal kings in the hands of the leading lady of the harem. All his properties and honours were restored to him. Not only that: he was appointed the second Bakshi, a post next in importance to that of Zulfiqar Khan only. A new title, Ghazanffar Khan, was awarded to him.

The Sikh guerillas continued, however, to harass the imperial forces and to occasionally inflict on them defeats that compensated, to some extent, their losses and setbacks in open warfare. Their most sensational exploit of the post-Lohgarh period was the waylaying and slaughtering to a man of a fairly large Mughal force proceeding from Jullundur to Kasur. The *Faujdar* of Jullundur, Shams Khan, was slain in a sharp hand-to-hand scuffle, his head cut off and paraded atop a bamboo pole in the streets of Kasur which happened to be the Khan's home-town. Though subdued, the Sikhs were yet far from defeated. Their attempts, not their deeds, confounded Bahadur Shah and his commanders. Banda Bahadur was hiding somewhere in the labyrinth of the lofty hills. His absence acted as a spur in the side of his followers to outdo him in the war of surprises that left the enemy guessing. It was as difficult to pin the Sikhs to the ground as it was to nab the Maharattas in the winding hills of the Western Ghats. Bahadur Shah seemed to know this ugly reality but pride, mother of vanity and self-exultation, induced him to hide it from himself.

Gradually, the search for Banda slackened. Whereas desperation very often breeds courage, it also gives rise to apathy in certain circumstances. At near-seventy, the Emperor was fast losing interest in the pageantry of the present. The airy mysteries of the unknown future had begun to exercise his mind. He gathered around him a galaxy of *ulema* famous for their knowledge of the fundamentals of all religions in general and Islam in particular. The debates he sponsored under his own patronage were unusually frank and at times indiscreetly violent in expression of views. Often Bahadur Shah had to remind the participants of the court etiquette, and ask them to be restrained in the choice of words.

In one stormy debate, bearing on the use of the word *warsi* (heir) after the name Hazrat Ali, Commander of the Faithful, Haji Yar Muhammad Khan, spoke against the suggestion with such passion that the Emperor told him: "You are a scholar of Islamic law. I respect you for that accomplishment. You speak with the violence of an apostate. For that intemper-

ance I may have to ask you to leave unless you apologise and undertake to observe in future a proper decorum in speech". Yar Muhammad submitted his regret and gave the assurance demanded. The debate continued. The Emperor favoured the innovation, and he quoted extensively from the works of many religious teachers in support of his contention. The assembly was, however, overwhelmingly against the royal directive*, and left the Emperor in no doubt that, if implemented, the change might spark a religious revolt of incalculable consequences. Prince Azim-ush-Shan was secretly in sympathy with the views expressed by the *ulema*.

The Emperor insisted, however, on compliance with his instructions. Nearly a hundred thousand Afghans, residing in Lahore, made ready for a showdown. Bahadur Shah ordered the army to move into the city to forestall eruption of violence. The situation was explosive when the reciter of the *khutba* ascended the pulpit to carry out the royal order. He began, as usual, in slow, measured words the praise of Allah and the blandishment of "His shadow on earth Syed Qutb-ud-Din Muhammad Shah Alam Bahadur Shah Padshah". At the crucial point, to the amazement of the congregation, he skipped the controversial word *warsi* and went on to complete the *khutba* in the traditional orthodox way. His arrest by a contingent of *Aahidis* provoked a riot in which several hundred people lost their lives in a matter of minutes. Azim-ush-Shan and Islam Khan, fearing a major revolt, advised the Emperor to withdraw the order. Bahadur Shah had no alternative but to give in. The reciter was released. A proclamation was made by the beat of drum that "in view of the sentiments of the population, His Majesty the Emperor has withdrawn the change and that the *khutba* as read by the reciter will be considered as the word of the Almighty".

A crisis was averted. The shock, however, affected Bahadur Shah's mind. Weird delusions haunted him day and night. To the physicians' submission that he should take rest in one of the palaces in the city, he replied, with frantic waving of the arm, that "angels, riding golden chariots, are dissuading me from entering the capital". He spent nearly four weeks in camp on the bank of the Ravi rocking, as it were, in the cradle of a retarded infant. One day, after seeing a stray dog flirt with an unwilling bitch, he ordered that all dogs, wherever they might be found,

*Bahadur Shah issued an order after reaching the neighbourhood of Lahore on 11 August 1711, that the change suggested should be incorporated in the *khutba* to be read in his name in the mosques of the Punjab capital. The population resented the break from tradition. Widespread riots broke out. The order had to be withdrawn.

should be killed by poisoning. Nearly five hundred dogs lay dead in and around the camp before he told his personal physician, Mutamud-ul-Mulk, that he had decided to withdraw the order at the request of a deputation of a hundred tail-wagging bitches!

The signs gradually became clear that the emperor was heading fast towards mental atrophy. The schedule for a visit to Kashmir was shelved at the advice of the *hukma* in attendance. Instead, preparations were made for return to Agra "lest the prowling Sikhs seize the throne in the event of the Allah taking possession of the Emperor while he is in the north". When told of this change of plan by Azim-ush-Shan, the Emperor looked up skywards and said: "I am in the company of houries in heaven. What does it matter whether I am in Agra or Srinagar. Both cities are realms of the *Jannat*. Lahore is different. I have no reason to express a desire to visit that dreary domain of *Dozakh*."

In the middle of January, 1712, while he was still berthed on the bank of the Ravi, Bahadur Shah complained of intense stomach pains and loss of sensations hip downwards. The royal *jarrah,* Ali Muhammad Mansoor, did some minor surgery to facilitate the flow of blood to the lower region of the body, but to no avail. Panic in the camp developed into a state of alarm as the four sons, fearing the worst, prepared for the inevitability of a war of succession. Following a week of insufferable discomfort, Bahadur Shah died on 27 February 1712.

Chapter 6

WAR OF SUCCESSION

AZIM-USH-SHAN was the first to proclaim himself emperor, and he took that step while his father's body lay virtually unattended in the red-and-blue tent. A majority of noblemen and army commanders had fled the camp for fear of involvement in a war the result of which was hard to predict. The two surviving wives — Mehar Parwar and Aziz-un-Nissa Khanum — were taken to the fort in Lahore ostensibly for reasons of security but in actuality to prevent them from influencing the course of the conflict.

Bahadur Shah's French physician, M. Martin, remained at his bedside till two slave-girls covered the body with a white sheet. Seldom before had an Emperor breathed his last in such forlorn circumstances. Not even a priest was around to pray for his soul. There was no lamplighter at hand when the sun was about to say adieu to a day bleak and sad. It was several hours after the evening shut that an armed guard was deployed around the tent at the orders of Azim-ush-Shan.

The other three sons of Bahadur Shah — Jahandar Shah, Rafi-ush-Shan and Jahan Shah — were already conspiring at a secret conference with Zulfiqar Khan to find ways to first demolish Azim-ush-Shan and then to partition the Empire among themselves. Perhaps the ambitious commander-in-chief saw in that princely rift an opportunity to found a new dynasty of Persian rulers in Hindustan. Zulfiqar Khan's father, Asad Khan, a Persian by parentage, entered Mughal service in the twenty-seventh year of the reign of Shah Jahan. Aurangzeb elevated him to the rank of Prime Minister in 1676.

For thirty days the body of Bahadur Shah, who ruled over "the largest Empire on earth" for five years, one month and twenty-two days, lay decomposing in a tent only royal in name. The camp was deserted as Azim-ush-Shan mobilised all available men to face the impending

assault by the brothers in conspiracy against him. Fierce battles took place near Lahore on 15 and 16 March. The combined forces, led personally by Jahandar Shah, pulverised the defences built around his camp by Azim-ush-Shan. The latter was defeated, and he got drowned in the Ravi along with the elephant he rode.

The partners in victory fell out as soon as Azim was out of the way. Ten days later, Jahan Shah was killed in a battle against Jahandar Shah. In the last engagement of the three-corner conflict on 29 March, Rafi-ush-Shan fell to a bullet from the gun of an Afghan, Ghaffar Khan. Within a span of one month, three sons of Bahadur Shah died while his own body still lay waiting for a grave. Jahandar Shah became the fourth occupant of the Peacock throne. Lady Luck smiled on him, but he was at the time blissfully unaware of the daggers that lay hidden in the smiles of that wanton woman.

Zulfiqar Khan, who undertook to play the honest broker for the three princes pitched against Azim-ush-Shan, the ablest of Bahadur Shah's sons, became the new Prime Minister. Cautious self-control was the root of his rise to the highest office in the realm. This art of advancement in Mughal service was bequeathed to him by his father, Asad Khan, who was the most trusted Vizir of Alamgir for nearly two decades.

Munim Khan's death on 28 February 1711, at the age of sixty-six left a void in administration that Bahadur Shah found extremely hard to fill. The post was offered to Zulfiqar, but he preferred the Viceroyalty of the six southern states. Mahabat Khan, son of Munim Khan, was considered too high-tempered for that position. In the end, the honour went to Hidayatullah Khan, eldest son of Inayatullah Khan.

In appreciation of Munim Khan's loyal service extending over a period of nearly twenty years, Bahadur Shah ordered that the Vizir's entire property, assessed at approximately rupees thirty million, be distributed among his sons. The body of Munim Khan was sent to Delhi for burial with traditional honours near the Qutab. Whatever his faults as a monarch and as a man, Bahadur Shah was not an ingrate. Munim Khan led him virtually by the hand to the throne following the death of Aurangzeb in 1707. That the house of Asad Khan regained ascendancy in the new regime was a comment on the vagaries of fortune at high places in Mughal India.

It was after Jahandar Shah formally seated himself on the throne that the obsequies at the passing away of Bahadur Shah were solemnised with prayers, recitations and alms-giving. His body, or what remained of it, was sent to Delhi under the charge of Bibi Mehar Parwar and Chin Qitch

Khan. The burial took place on 13 May 1712 at Mehroli*. Bahadur Shah lived for seventy years, five months and twenty days— an age long in terms of time but in terms of performance it showed no great achievement. The three arch-enemies of the Mughals — Maharattas, Rajputs and Sikhs—remained where they were at the time of his accession in 1707: on the war-path, defiant and provocative. Administration, both in the north and in the south—was in the shambles. The Governors and native chiefs were busy strengthening their positions to meet unforeseen situations. The writing on the wall was clear. The Mughal Empire was crumbling fast.

Though Bahadur Shah achieved little, he lost less. He bequeathed to Jahandar Shah what he inherited from Aurangzeb: a vast empire with all its advantages and disadvantages, pockets of discontent as also of devoted loyalty, intrigues at high places, decline of faith in the goodness of man, rise of religious fundamentalism, decay of arts, sciences and literary scholarship, dwindling pride in the glories of the past, shrinking areas of cooperation among different communities, rise of rank opportunism, degeneration of moral values—in fact, Jahandar Shah came to the throne to reap the fruits of intolerance, distrust and crusading aggression sown by Aurangzeb. Bahadur Shah was only a nominal link between 1707 and 1712. His age was against him. Five years of reign at sixty-five was like going in to bat last in the wake of a confusing collapse. Temperamentally, he was not the man for the occasion. There was not enough steel in him to meet successfully the challenges of time. He chose to swim with the tide for as long as he could. His capacity for compromise was astonishing, his will not to make any more enemies infinite. He nearly perfected the art of making a negative asseveration with affirmatives combining ambiguity with courtesy. Seldom did he turn down straightaway a request, a plea or a recommendation. He was too sensitive an individual to hurt anyone's feelings, may he be a brother-in-arms, a self-seeking nobleman, a sycophant seeking favours for himself and his friends, a poet seeking reward for a poem he did not like, a brother-in-law asking approval for marriage with a slave-girl, a Brahmin in search of funds for construction of a temple, a Prime Minister aspiring for a more prestigious title or a maid-servant appealing for grant of permission to make a request she knew she should not make. He agreed with a smile to accede to all that was asked for. This was the tragedy and glory of

* William Irvine in his work, *Later Mughals*, states that Bahadur Shah was buried in the compound of Alamgir's mosque near the shrine of Qutab-ud-Din in Lahore. Perhaps his body was kept there for some time before its transfer to Delhi.

Bahadur Shah. He was a good individual, an indifferent king. The yes-cult may perhaps be an adornment for saints; it is a certain recipe for ruin of one charged with the duties and obligations of a ruler. Kingship must in some ways be limited to be possessed.

Bahadur Shah was not indifferent to religion. He was a devout Muslim, but that did not make him an implacable enemy of other religions. Well-read in Islamic literature, he would often quote extensively from the Quran, as from other holy books in Arabic, Persian and Turki in support of his liberalism. He took up arms against the Sikhs not because of religious differences, but because of the compulsions of governance. To Rajputs, he offered peace with honour. The Fate did not allow him time to show his hand against the Maharattas. He respected, with a degree of awe, the saints and scholars of all faiths. To one Baba Pyara Dass of Benaras he openly confessed "obedience to the spirit". The famed sadhu, he wrote, "enlightened me more than once by lucid comments on the substance of the Vedas". The Gita maxim that man was made to do his duty without the thought of heaven or hell struck Bahadur Shah to be the perfection of pragmatic approach to life. He offered Pyara Dass a *jagir* for life and also allowed him free access to court whenever he wished to call on him. The sadhu politely declined to "be burdened with the means of worldly comfort" and, it is said, he never came to Delhi in search of an audience with the Emperor. Bahadur Shah travelled to Benaras three times "to be benefited by the pearls of wisdom falling from the lips of the stainless sage".

Bahadur Shah's aversion to "the dark, dreary apartments in palaces" was perhaps a species of melancholy. A large part of his life was spent in camps in the Deccan. The closed, sunless solitude of royal mansions oppressed him no end. The camps, pitched on the banks of rivers, or at other scenic places, charmed him. "My tent is my heaven", he told the head of a Dutch trade delegation that called on him a few days before his death near Lahore. The tents of his favourite wives, concubines and mistresses were often connected with his own tent by a network of underground tunnels. These narrow pathways were lit night and day with multi-coloured lamps. Rich carpets were spread from tent-to-tent, and trusted eunuchs stationed at every corner to ensure safety for the dignitaries of the harem. Bahadur Shah himself never entered these subways. The narrow channels did not mix with his love for open spaces. The wives came to him; he seldom used these circumscribed routes to go to them. At Lahore, two months before his death, he used a small-size *palki* to travel nearly two furlongs to the tent of Zinat-un-Nissa Khanum

who was confined to bed for several days with high fever. He returned by the overground longer route.

Outwardly a fun-loving seeker after pleasure, Bahadur Shah at heart was a very sad man. His effort to please everybody boomeranged on him; it distressed him greatly to discover that the attempt to please all could result only in pleasing none. The number of his foes at the court and in the harem increased in proportion to the number of petitions on which he scribbled "granted" in his own handwriting. His wives, mistresses and concubines became so jealous of each other that the Emperor began to consider them incapable of harbouring the finer, tender sentiments. By and by a majority of them went out of favour, not because the Emperor turned away from them but because the upsurge of jealousies and the allied womanly weaknesses sapped their bosoms of the virtues that endear woman to man. Bahadur Shah was in agony at times to see them wallow in their own doubts and misgivings. Though he loved them still, yet he did not expect any heart-catching response from them. In soul-searing desperation, he took to expressing his agony in verse and in prose. The contemporary historian Qattar Khan gave a few samples of Bahadur Shah's essays in the field of poetry. "Woman, thy wiles are in proportion to thy beauty, and thy virtues in proportion to thy sufferings", he wrote in a four-stanza poem composed just after he became the ruler of Hindustan.

It was believed that Bahadur Shah's disillusionment with women arose from the pride and jealousy that Zinat-un-Nissa concealed under her smooth brow. "I have the capacity to suffer cruel, open hatred, but the hatred which is kind and concealed is beyond endurance", he wrote in a letter to his alter-ego Munim Khan after the withdrawal of forces from Rajasthan. Bahadur Shah was endowed with the ability to analyse and coordinate his feelings with a degree of objectivity rare in despots whose will was law. He kept his anguishes, for the most part, to himself, believing as he did that "the tongue is an instrument of goodwill, not of gall"

Some historians called him a 'Shah-i-Bekhabar' (uninformed emperor). This is perhaps not true. He knew all, but he was averse to sharing what he knew with unthinking men and women. He preferred to "let his inside burn in agony" than to raise even small fires in the hearts of others. It is generally agreed that he was a misfit as an emperor. This is a comment not on his shortcomings, but on the high-minded goodness he was endowed with. He often went hunting, but seldom did he fire his gun to rob a bird or a beast of his life. He let others do the killings, and he let

himself enjoy the open air and the beauty of nature. He ate meats only rarely. Once he was reported to have told Mehar Parwar Begum that "I hear the death-cry of a goat, a chicken or a calf whenever their flesh comes between my teeth". She laughed out the confession as the sign of a weak, timid mind. One could as well regard it as the manifestation of his high sensitivities. His heart bled at the sight of blood spurting out from the neck of an animal under the butcher's knife.

Bahadur Shah was not made to be a king; he could have filled with honour a high seat at Nalanda, Cambridge, Harvard or Oxford. He was a human being first and last. Suffering in all forms distressed him. Once he happened to hear the wailings of a calf when its hind and forelegs were bound together for the sacrificial act. Not only did he rush to the spot and order the animal to be freed; he banned the performance of such "barbaric acts in the gaze and hearing of men and women whose hearts are not stones".

Among a nobility generally corrupt and self-seeking, kingdoms cannot last long. The court of Bahadur Shah was packed with such high-ranking officials whose wealth exceeded their wisdom and whose ambition overran the limits of reality. Bahadur Shah produced *en masse* noblemen of prestigious titles and ranks, but not even one gentleman who put loyalty above opportunism. The Badakhshani Munim Khan was perhaps the last of the noblemen who lived to serve and advance the interests of the Empire. His son, Mahabat Khan, aspired for greatness without possessing the ability to be great. The result was a general dissatisfaction that Bahadur Shah had neither the will nor the power to check. Zulfiqar Khan, son of Asad Khan, was another top dignitary who by and by became a symbol of disagreement with the policies of Bahadur Shah. The mediocrities at the helm of affairs at the court and in provinces were all men of the same hue — unworthy aspirants for power while the Mughal authority was on the decline. They all knew that the stage was set for a change, but none of them possessed the prescience to foresee the shape of things to come. Confusion is the ideal breeding ground for adventurers intent on plunder. There was a rush, both in the north and the south, for establishment of little kingdoms on the ruins left by Aurangzeb. Bahadur Shah was only a helpless spectator of the organised loot that took place during the five and a half years of his reign. A soft heart laid him low and rendered him incapable of firm action. He was content to be left alone in the camp with his visions, his pleasures and his sorrows. The future, he said in his last recorded audience, would look after itself.

The not-too-silent touches of time eroded Bahadur Shah's confidence in himself, as also in his sons, his wives and his noblemen. On the death-bed, he made a pathetic figure — a bundle of bones without the will to live. Forsaken by love and loyalty, he cast his weary glance sometimes at the miniature copy of the holy Quran found in the howdah of the elephant on which rode Muhammad Azam in the battle of Jajau. This was the self-same copy which lay for years under the pillow of Aurangzeb in times of war and peace. Once or twice his lips were seen to quiver. Perhaps he wanted to say something. The voice failed him. His last movement was a slight lift of the right hand — an attempt perhaps to say *alwida* to friends and foes alike. The next moment he lay dead. Neither tears nor wailings marked his passing away. The tent was almost empty. A French doctor, M. Martin, stood deferentially in a corner watching the end scene of a drama that meant different things to different men. The *farangi* bowed his bald head in salutation and also perhaps in prayer.

The curtain thus came down on the short reign of Bahadur Shah. He was not endowed with the stout gifts of fearlessness, courage and valour. What he possessed in ample measure, and what he would be remembered for, was the tender gift of a sensitive soul of the species that in its supreme development equates all sentient beings with God. If one is blessed with the sympathetic genius of that type, naught else, one has the best thing God has invented. Historians have judged him differently, but no one has denied that kindness was the common factor in his acts of war and peace. This is more than what can be said of some other rulers of the Mughal dynasty.

Jahandar Shah

Chapter 7

LOVE AND LUST

THE story of Jahandar Shah is the story of Lal Kanwar. She was no ordinary dancing-girl. The blood of Mian Tansen, in the fifth generation, ran in her veins on the paternal side*. In her feet there lay hidden the grace that won for Rupmati the heart of Baz Bahadur. She was a descendant of Rupmati, from the mother's side, in the fourth generation. When to this rare-vintage combination were added a shapely figure, alluring limbs and high ambition, there emerged a woman so beautiful that to expect caution and wisdom from her was foolish. A charming female of near-perfect proportions permits neither morals nor truth.

When Prince Muiz-ud-Din (later Jahandar Shah) fell a prey to a *thumri* sung by her in the Governor's palace (1703) at Multan, he was forty-two, out of royal favour, and in search of something he knew not what. The occasion was an entertainment held in honour of a Persian dignitary and his two wives. Anup Bai, much-admired consort of the prince, was also present, along with other ladies, behind the gold-and-silver screens. The mirth and fun grew fast and furious as the evening advanced into late hours. If the dancing-girl is beautiful, the wine goes to the head quickly. Though Muiz-ud-Din drank cup after cup of the shimmering *ab-i-hyat*, he was not drunk. Lal Kanwar, wearing a loose, white dress of Gujarat silk, kept him entranced. Before the party ended near midnight, the prince was in love. Lal Kanwar knew what had happened. When she came up to the royal dais to give the prince the parting bow, the silent messages that passed between them were no longer silent. Two days later Lal Kanwar entered the prince's harem — an event that the gods perhaps engineered to hasten the final demolition of the Mughal Empire. Beauty may for a while inspire and uplift, as a Persian proverb says, it will not

*Lal Kanwar was the daughter of Khaqsayat Khan, a musician of note in northern India in the last decade of the seventeenth century.

season soup. In the long history of the House of Timur, beautiful women were nearly always quarrelling with peace and stability.

As has already been narrated, Muiz-ud-Din was the son of Nizam Bai, a pious lady whose good looks passed away as quickly as do the echo and the rainbow. She was fifteen when Shah Alam married her in 1660. He was then seventeen, a high-blooded prince full of ambition, pleasure-lust, and a degree of uncommon rectitude in the conduct of state affairs. When Muiz-ud-Din was born thirteen months later on May 10, 1661, there were great rejoicings in the royal house. The occasion demanded it. The eldest son of the eldest son of Aurangzeb was a potential future emperor. Alamgir presented the infant grandson, among other things, a miniature copy of the Quran in letters of gold. To Nizam Bai, he gave a jagir in her own name in the Deccan, and to Shah Alam a rise in *mansab* by four thousand.

Very little is known about the early boyhood of Muiz-ud-Din. It may, however, be presumed that he went through the course of studies traditionally laid down for royal princes. The war of succession had, to a large extent, destroyed the even tenor of life; it had also left big holes in the scholastic system of the time. The known puritanism of Aurangzeb was a damper for artists, poets and men of letters who concentrated on subjects other than religion. The court life, at nearly every level, was in disarray. The shadows of Maharattas, Rajputs and the Jats fell everywhere. A large section of the nobility had yet to reconcile itself to new values, new norms of behaviour. In its undefined distress, it prayed vaguely for mercy, pity and peace. The glories of the past were to it only a pleasant dream. The present bristled with unpleasant alternatives, and the future was no more than a baffling jungle of uncertainties. In these circumstances, it was only but natural that the struggle for survival should get the better of the struggle for improvement of the mind. Even the royal princes did not escape the effects of fears and doubts that haunted nearly every mind. Muiz-ud-Din, we are told, was a sensitive child. The changes that were taking place all around left their mark on him. He was a child of instability, not of peace and tranquillity.

Much of his time, when he was not old enough to be a man and neither young enough to be a boy, was spent in the Deccan. Shah Alam made the camp his home. His children also imbibed a preference for life in the open. The road of pleasure in the company of nature, it is said, bifurcates after one has travelled on it for some distance, one leading to the place of wisdom and the other to the pastures of uncontrolled passion. Muiz-ud-Din grew into a strong and lusty young man who revelled in the

pleasures of the flesh. It was at the age of sixteen that he first tasted wine —after a tiring day in the hunting preserve near Burhanpur. The elation possessed him, as it did, in similar circumstances, his great great-grandfather, Shahzada Salim (later Emperor Jahangir) in 1586. The cup of *ab-i-shirin* that he drank that evening turned out to be the beginning of thoughtless follies that later laid him low and stained his name. If a fool persists in his folly, he may one day be classed among the wise. Persistence with beverages that inebriate does not, however, have even a remote chance of being considered a virtue. Muiz-ud-Din was full of good intentions within. The wine quenched them all.

There are some excesses which have in them an element of moderation, but the excesses committed by Muiz-ud-Din in the flush of youth were unrestrained by considerations either of justice or propriety. Reason was the slave of his passions.

Muiz-ud-Din could be generous to a fault to gain some worldly end or the other. Similarly, liberalism in matters of religion was to him a means, not an end by itself. Given his moods, his temperament, and his passions, an early rift with his father was inevitable. Shah Alam did whatever he could, directly or indirectly through the *ulema* entrusted with his education, to tame him, but in vain. Muiz-ud-Din was responsive neither to reason nor to appeals in the names of tradition and royal decorum. He was resolved to have his way in all matters that caught his fancy. For over a decade (1696-1707) there was little meaningful communication between father and son. When Shah Alam was entrusted, towards the end of Aurangzeb's reign, with the governance of the north-west provinces (Punjab, Kabulistan and Sind) he sent Muiz-ud-Din to Multan, hoping that independence would do what paternal umbrella had failed to accomplish. The experiment yielded only one result — Lal Kanwar!

Thereafter, everything with Muiz-ud-Din became love or hate. Brothers, sisters, relatives, and friendly noblemen—they all became suspect in the prince's eyes. Infatuation with a winsome woman controlled his heart, his head, his very being. She was an epicurean who lived by song and dance and such other things as pleased her senses. The prince was helpless in the web of her voice and delicate steps.

Swayed powerfully by passion, Muiz-ud-Din lived perilously for nearly fifteen years on the brink, as it were, of a precipice deep and frightening in dimensions. In the end when he fell into it there was no regret on his lips. He wanted to be reborn for another innings in the company of Lal Kanwar.

Generally, the Mughal princes married early. Muiz-ud-Din's first wife came when he was fifteen. She was the daughter of Mirza Muhammad Khan Safvi, a high-ranking nobleman of the court of Aurangzeb. The wedding took place at Agra on 4 October 1676, not with the traditional gaiety of wine parties and display of presents from either side, but within the framework of restraints prescribed by Alamgir. The presents given to the bride were estimated to be of the value of rupees one hundred thousand. She was only fourteen. Her woman's personality was yet to come to full bloom. Among other knick-knacks of jewellery, Aurangzeb handed over to her personally a silver plaque on which was inscribed in letters of gold: "Modesty and silence are the finest ornaments of a royal princess". The young bride, well-versed in court etiquette, raised the plaque to her head and then bowed low gracefully in gratitude for the solemn advice. To the last day of her life, this gift occupied a place of prominence in her apartment. She grew to be a pious woman, more righteous than beautiful. Aurangzeb respected her. She was one of the few princesses whom he invariably invited to accompany him to holy shrines in the Deccan. Muiz-ud-Din was different from her in temperament, beliefs and aspirations. It was, therefore, not surprising that he did not find in her the heaven he yearned for.

Following the induction to his harem of nearly fifty mistresses — all low-class entertainers of little virtue and less intelligence — he married on 3 August 1684, Sayed-un-Nissa, daughter of Mirza Rustam and a niece of his first Safvi consort. This alliance was part love, part trade. Beauty was the badge of the women of Safvi dynasty. Besides, Sayed-un-Nissa was a spirited conversationalist, excelling in the art of speaking for hours an immense deal of nothing on subjects as diverse as the power of love and the power of money. The twenty-three-year-old prince was enchanted by her liveliness and the manner in which she frisked about without inhibition from one delicate subject to another without letting the enticing, faint smile go out from her lips and her eyes. She was not an astute intellectual who could analyse with felicity the why and wherefore of the mysteries of life. The best that could be said about her was that she knew what was what—an excellent equippage for a very beautiful daughter of a very influential nobleman.

Muiz-ud-Din was already jealous of his brothers and, the worst, he had begun to suspect his father for harbouring ill-will towards him. The throne, though distant, influenced his thoughts. The Safvis possessed the power and influence to help realise his aspirations. Muiz-ud-Din was so

made that he could fall in half-love with any woman with grace, good looks and a gentle, artless tongue. It is, therefore, not surprising that Sayed-un-Nissa continued to be in high favour till Lal Kanwar came on the scene with her animal passions.

Anup Bai, a Rajput princess, was the only other legally wedded woman who "for a while became a partner in the prince's pleasures". She was the mother of Aziz-ud-Din (Moin-ud-Dowla) who in 1754 occupied the throne for five years with the title Alamgir II. According to a Dutch traveller, "this dainty princess was always buying or selling something". A princess by birth and a princess by marriage, her mind was swayed only by diamonds, pearls and robes of the finest fibres of Gujarat and Kashmir. The birth of a son in the second year of her wedlock gave her "a status dreamt of by many but achieved only by a few fortunate ones". Her pride became prouder, and thenceforth she found it easier to do ill than well. Her eclipse was as quick as her rise to prominence. She died at Delhi unmourned on 17 April 1735.

In a Mughal house, mother was nothing, father everything. That the names of mothers of the rest of the four children of Muiz-ud-Din — two sons and two daughters — are not known is inconsequential. The eldest son, Aziz-ud-Din, was born in 1690. He played a dismal role in the battle against Farrakh-Siyyar in 1712, retreating to Agra before a shot was fired. According to the official historian, "his bones were marrowless, his blood cold and his eyes without a sparkle of cheer". Two years later, in the mad rush for power that could not but spark unspeakable atrocities against possible claimants to the throne, he underwent the extreme torture of having red-hot needles thrust into both his eyes. For thirty years thereafter he lived in Delhi as a "blind prince" before death took possession of him on 12 December 1744. His two wives sobbed and sighed at his passing away, but their subdued lamentations had little real grief in them.

Aziz-ud-Din was as characterless as a standing pond. His misfortunes turned him into a non-believer in God, in himself, and in everybody around him. Syed Begum, grand-daughter of Azam Shah, whom he married in 1709, recorded the date of her husband's death in the famous chronogram "blind love is beautiful". His other wife, daughter of Amin Khan, whom he married in 1706, was a deeply religious person. She visited the grave of her husband in the Humayun tomb complex every Friday after dusk for a whole year. Her love for Aziz-ud-Din had in it more pity than admiration.

The second son of Muiz-ud-Din was born in 1691. Where? In what month? These details are not known. His name was Izzad Din, and was later given the title Izz-ud-Dowla. That he died at Delhi in confinement in 1738 leads to the belief that, like his elder brother, he too suffered atrocities at the hands of the Syed brothers who made and unmade Emperors at will following the ignominious surrender of Jahandar Shah in 1712. Details about the alleged sins he committed to merit imprisonment are not known. Neither are recorded in official chronicles the names of his wives nor the dates of his marriages. This omission is intriguing. The particulars of assignments given to him in the reign of Bahadur Shah are also not known. Perhaps the tide of time was against full and accurate coverage by news-writers. Amidst the quick changes of rulers, as also of top official administrators, the normal court functions and procedures became topsy-turvy. A state of flux does not go well with the recording of history.

As has already been stated, Aziz-ud-Din was born to the Rajput princess Anup Bai in 1687 at Multan. He came to the throne, rather the throne came to him, in 1754. Assuming the title Alamgir II, he ruled for five years—a fairly long spell considering that his five predecessors could total only fifteen years among themselves. Details about his reign and his character will be discussed at the appropriate place. Here it will be enough to record that he either loved or loathed; he knew no medium. The Rajput in him was more evident than the Mughal.

Rabi Begum, daughter born perhaps of a concubine at Multan in 1695, was a child gifted with good looks, intelligence and the sensitivities of a poet. At twelve she had read not only Persian and Arabic classics, but also the Hindi works of Amir Khusrau, Kabir and Surdas. In 1710, at the age of fifteen, she was betrothed to Badar Dil, son of Badar Bakht. Four months later, on 7 September 1710, she died suddenly following an attack of high fever. In her case, it can certainly be said that those who die young are in the good books of the gods in heaven. Her tutor, Maulana Nisar Ahmand Sirhindi, bemoaned her passing away as "an irreparable loss to the realm of letters". He likened her to a "bird of paradise who would fly as high as the sky and then return to earth without an iota of ego in her shapely head". Nearly all members of the royal family gave her a touching farewell at the grave-side. There is no more attractive thing than a young person when her mind is set on the lofty heights of the spirit. Rabi lived up to her name. The divinity in her was too apparent to be missed.

There was another daughter of Jahandar Shah, neither so good-

looking nor so cute of mind as Rabi Begum, whose accomplishments as a musician came to light early. It is said that her rendering of *Dhurpad* was so soulful that even Lal Kanwar listened to her with envious admiration. The celebration of Nauroz was resurrected towards the close of Bahadur Shah's reign. On that day in 1714 "a daughter of Jahandar Shah kept the imperial family entranced for over an hour with the spell of her classical music". She was married at the age of seventeen to Khwaja Mirza Sarbland Khan. Other details about her life are not available.

A passing reference has already been made to the criss-cross of jealousies among Bahadur Shah's sons. By virtue of his intelligence, courage and administrative skill, Azim-ush-Shan was in high favour towards the end of Bahadur Shah's life. He was also the richest and the most powerful of the four brothers. His following among the nobility was impressive in that nearly two-thirds of *mansabdars* above the rank of four thousand had pledged themselves to support him in a war of succession that loomed large on the horizon. In comparison, Muiz-ud-Din, out of favour, without money and followers, sensuous, overbearing, haughty and, what was worse, helpless in the hands of Lal Kanwar, looked no match for any of his three brothers in an armed contest. Slow of wit and slow of taking decisions, he wasted his time and whatever little resources he possessed in reconciling probables with possibilities and consulting astrologers about the opinions and attitudes of Divine controller of destinies. He was lazy, inapt and unpredictable in reacting to developments around him. "I need little else if Lalo (Lal Kanwar) is by my side", he told a Rajput chief who came to Multan to inquire if the prince needed assistance in an emergency. Infatuation with a woman was his undoing. He listened to music while the Punjab was pillaged by the armies of Banda. Bahadur Shah knew of his son's unconcern for the affairs of state. He did not send for him till it became clear that his days were numbered.

Rafi-ush-Shan and Jahan Shah, along with Azim-ush-Shan, were already in Lahore, ostensibly to fight the Sikhs but in actuality to be near their seventy-year-old ailing father. Their distrust of each other was so great that at times they behaved like wild beasts snarling bared-teeth for the right of possession of a dead calf. Whatever intelligence they possessed was used to scheme and conspire against one another — a state of mutual hatred that made them look more obnoxious than the lurking viper. The nobility became disenchanted. A large number of the senior

generals and courtiers left the camp in disgust lest they were found to be on the wrong side. The arrival of Muiz-ud-Din enlarged the dimensions of suspicions that stalked the four camps. Like love, hate too is blind, and those engaged in the game of hate cannot see the stupid follies they themselves commit.

One evening Muiz-ud-Din happened to visit the Emperor's tent at a time when Azim-ush-Shan was already there. The two sat by the side of their father's bed, inquiring about his state of health and cited scriptures to underline their resolve to demolish the roving Sikh forces. Meanwhile, Azim's eye fell on a bejewelled dagger that lay on a marble stool near the Emperor's head. He picked it up, apparently to examine the fine workmanship and the purity of the pearls. Muiz-ud-Din read in this movement a design too evil to be ignored. He rose up in a huff, and rushed out without taking leave of the Emperor. He stumbled at the doorway, recovered balance with great effort, and then his turban was caught in the low branches of a tree. Seeing his discomfiture, the guards rushed to his assistance, but he did not let anybody come near him. It was only when he reached his escorting unit that he brought himself to a halt. Without explaining the reason of his agitation he asked for his horse, mounted the animal with a jump, and sped away to his own camp. He never came to see the Emperor again. Neither did he see Azim-ush-Shan till the battle in which the latter lost his life.

There is a Mongol maxim that no trust should be placed in a woman and a brother. Muiz-ud-Din remembered only one part of this saying and forgot the second. Innumerable stories are told by contemporary historians, including some Dutch and English traders, to underscore his utter lack of faith in his brothers. Talking one day to Zulfiqar Khan about Rafi-ush-Shan, he remarked: "I would not pass him for a man if God had not made him. Asses have more sense than he has". On an other occasion, he shook his angry looks at the man who happened to come up with a word of praise for Azim-ush-Shan's courage, and said: "No virtue can ever reside in that corrupt and fetid frame". As has been pointed out by Iradat Khan, "the eldest son of Bahadur Shah was chained and bound securely in the doubts and fears of his own making". He committed many a deed of dreadful note because of this mistrust and yet, the wonder of wonders, God gave him victory in the war of succession. Dispensations of the deity are beyond the arithmetic of reason. Success is not always the result of faith and trust.

The story of the contest for the crown has already been told. Muiz-ud-Din won, due primarily to the wily intrigues and courage of Zulfiqar

Khan. Azim-ush-Shan, Rafi-ush-Shan* and Jahan Shah** lost their lives in three sharp battles. The stars of Asad Khan and his son were apparently in the ascendant. They emerged as the most powerful son-father combination since the days of Bairam Khan and Abdur Rahim Khan-i-Khanan in the reign of Akbar.

*Three sons of Rafi-ush-Shan were also killed in battle. Their bodies, along with the body of Bahadur Shah, were sent to Delhi for burial at Mehroli.

** One of the children of Jahan Shah was found many hours after the battle was over on a run-away elephant with his nurse. Muiz-ud-Din ordered the child to be strangled to death.

Chapter 8

DATE WITH NEMESIS

ALL glitter is but little to the glitter of the crown. When Muiz-ud-Din wore it on 29 March 1712, he was dazzled by the turn fortune had taken. A hastily constructed brick platform on the battlefield near Lahore, where Rafi-ush-Shan was defeated and shot dead a day earlier, was the symbolic throne he ascended amidst low-key rejoicings.

The fifty-two-year-old new Emperor was called by the head priest, Maulana Ataullah Ansari, to take his seat on the well-bedecked podium "in obedience to the divine will". The trumpets were then sounded, and the *khatib* went up the steps of the pulpit at Badshahi mosque and proclaimed that "by the grace of the Almighty Allah the eldest son of the Khuld-Manzil Syed Qutb-ud-Din Muhammad Shah Alam Bahadur Shah Padshah, has come to the illustrious throne of Hindustan in the blessed name of Abdollah Muhammad Muiz-ud-Din Jahandar Shah. Allah be praised for His mercy, justice and love for the faithful".

Thus began the short reign of Jahandar Shah while the body of his father lay in a tent nearby awaiting burial. In the east, wailing and loud lamentations, not silence, give the proper grace to the passing away of a parent. The two surviving wives of Bahadur Shah — Mehar Parwar and Aziz-un-Nissa Khanum — had not had a chance yet to beat their breasts and pull at their hair in traditional-style mourning. Three of the four sons and four of the six grandsons of Bahadur Shah had fallen in fighting during the last three days. A large number of noblemen were slain in the war. A larger number had fled to the safety either of Lahore or other cities in Punjab. The few who survived the contest were busy planning how to curry favour with the new monarch. A loyal courtier was not only non-existent in the seventeenth century; it was impossible even to purchase loyalty at any price. Of all the ingrates of the court, said Iradat Khan, the most ungrateful was the victorious commander. This remark referred

perhaps to Zulfiqar Khan who excelled in the art of hiding one treacherous intention behind another. He cheated almost everybody who mattered in a long drawn-out manoeuvre to become Prime Minister. Once having secured that much-coveted post, he did not hesitate to use the meanest plot to keep it.

Bahadur Shah was unfortunate in his progeny, his spouses and his servants. None bemoaned his exit. Many weeks passed before his body was sent to Delhi for burial at Mehroli. Mehar Parwar headed the escorting party. In the outward show of grief, she beat all inmates of a fairly large harem. At Delhi she gave her sorrow many a doleful word. Thereafter she took to the *tasbih* and spent her days in quiet, dignified solitude. Foul whisperings, however, linked her name with a conspiracy to assist Farrakh-Siyyar's claim to the throne. There was no evidence to prove that charge. She seemed to have been made for silent suffering, nothing else.

Though victory cannot be consolidated with gold, still less can it be stabilised without it. Jahandar Shah had spent whatever little he possessed in paying the salaries of his soldiers. The spoils that came to him after victory, though large, were hardly sufficient to erase enmities and make loyalties more loyal. His first move after becoming Emperor was to seize the hidden wealth of his brothers, seal the imperial treasury in Lahore, search the vaults of the fort for chests of gold and money, take possession of the properties of noblemen who opposed him in the war, and send trusted commanders to Agra and Delhi to ensure that the stores of riches in the citadels there were not in any way encroached upon by his enemies. His lust for lucre was limitless. As the camel-loads of legal and illegal wealth were unloaded in his camp, Jahandar Shah felt stronger, but in actuality the seeds were sown for his early destruction.

The ageing Asad Khan, firm in ambition and search for power, was named Vakīl-i-Mulk, the post he held in the previous reign. This favourite Vizir of Aurangzeb was not one of those noblemen whose minds were swayed by the tender considerations of loyalty and tradition; his mind was set on usurping all authority and perhaps also on founding a Persian dynasty to replace the Mughals. He was not, as it were, a weaker vassal of Jahandar Shah. Knowing well that the Emperor was not young enough to be dynamic and not old enough to be circumspect and wise, he assumed to himself the airs of equality with royalty.

Jahandar Shah's uncontrolled passion and his penchant for pageantry rendered him vulnerable to criticism by the conservatives. Both Asad Khan and his son Zulfiqar Khan, who was named Prime Minister with the

title Nusrat Jang and a *mansab* of six thousand, bent over backwards to muster on their side the support of the *ulema* and such other members of the nobility as looked upon Islam as the only key to heaven. It was not long before Jahandar Shah became a mere plaything in their hands. The laws of Hindustan were under the command of this father-son combination till the Syeds of Barha took control in the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar. The long time secretary of Zulfiqar Khan, the worldly-wise Sabha Chand was named Diwan. His knowledge of revenue affairs bore some resemblance to the genius of Todar Mal in managing money matters. What he lacked in ability was more than made up by his cunning and the skill to adapt himself to the changing circumstances. He was a Rajput among Rajputs, a Sufi among Sufis, a fire-worshipper among those who worshipped the sun, a rebel among rebels and an ultra-loyalist among the faithful, a trader among traders, and an unashamed corrupt bureaucrat among bureaucrats of the same feather. Money was his God, the ultimate end of his exercises in loyalty and treachery. With such a man at the helm, the ship of state could not escape wreckage for long. The Prime Minister, as also the Vakil-i-Mulk, trusted him implicitly. The long habit of making riches by means fair and foul made them apathetic to truth and honesty.

Fear is the worst enemy of those who deviate from the path of righteousness. They see an enemy in every bush, a snake in every tuft of grass, a slayer in all those who carry a sword around their waist. The dread of nemesis sent Jahandar Shah and his advisers on a witch-hunt that ended only when they themselves were eliminated. The atrocities committed by them in the name of justice were almost savage in heartlessness. Rustamdil Khan, who fought gallantly on the side of Azim-ush-Shan, was cut to pieces limb by limb. He died as he fought with defiance writ large on every contour of his well-cut face. He continued to hurl abuse at Jahandar Shah and Zulfiqar Khan till the executioner's hatchet severed the head from the body. His last words were: "Tell that spineless Jahandar that Rustam lives in death. Ask that lover of a harlot to beware of the law of retribution. Rustams never die. Jahandars never live. Tell the same to that devil-incarnate Zulfiqar. Now I wait for the final blow".

Jani Khan, another general of Azim-ush-Shan, was also ordered to be hacked to death. He was saved at the last minute at the intercession of prince Aziz-ud-Din. The latter owed his life to Jani Khan. In the thick of the battle that ended in the death of Azim-ush-Shan, Rustamdil Khan all but put his sword through a panic-stricken Aziz-ud-Din. Amin Khan took the blow on his shield, saying "Let not your sword be covered with the

blood of a coward. Spare him. It is no use killing men who can do no harm". Now when Jani Khan was asked to say his last prayer before the royal order was carried out, Aziz-ud-Din pleaded with Zulfiqar Khan for "mercy for one who rescued me from the jaws of death". The Prime Minister halted the execution. Jani Khan was sent to Delhi, along with Mahabat Khan and twenty-one other commanders charged with disloyalty and treason, for imprisonment. Jahandar Shah complimented his son for the show of gratitude to his saviour.

Perhaps the most heartless post-victory atrocity committed by Zulfiqar Khan was the manner in which was done to death Abdul Karim, eldest son of Azim-ush-Shan. Following the defeat and death of his father, Karim took shelter in the house of a weaver twenty miles from Lahore. For twenty days the kindly host and his wife shared their poverty with the prince. When the larder became empty and the aged couple, with tears in their eyes, regretted not having the wherewithal for the next meal of *dal* and *roti*, the prince, pale with hunger and fear, took out from his bag a jewel of the size of a small walnut, handed it over to the weaver, saying: "Friend, this is my last possession. Sell it for what you can get. Keep me in your house till the present smoke and stir settle down. All I own is yours. I may never be able to pay fully for your generosity. Only Allah can recompense you for your goodness".

Unaware of the risk involved, the simple-hearted weaver took the shimmering stone to the village jeweller with results that were only to be expected. The size and purity of the precious stone went ill together with the known indigence of the septuagenarian *julaha*. Suspicion was aroused, and it was not long thereafter that the district *kotwal* traced correctly the owner of the jewel.

Looking like a calf that had just had its throat cut, the prince begged for mercy, but in vain. He was chained and taken to the royal camp outside Lahore. Jahandar Shah did not even look at his nephew. He ordered the prisoner to be taken to Zulfiqar Khan. The latter kicked the prince in the side, spat at him in a show of disgust, and asked him with the callousness of a stone if he had any preference with regard to the manner of execution. Despair gave Karim courage. His reply was a firm no. Two big, burly men dragged him out of the tent, and left him lying helpless in the blazing sun for nearly an hour before the *jallad* appeared on the scene. As his last wish, Abdul Karim asked for a piece of bread and a glass of water. The priest turned it down with a sneer that seemed to mock at God and His creation. The next moment the head that once rested on pillows with covers of silk and satin rolled on the ground in dust. One hefty blow of the executioner's sword severed it from the trunk. The body

was thrown to dogs and vultures for a meal. The Mughal tradition hung its head in shame at this ignoble crime. All the perfumes of the Orient would not suffice to sweeten the hand that struck Abdul Karim.

Having liquidated all real and potential enemies, Jahandar Shah left the bank of Ravi for Agra on 1 May 1712. Lal Kanwar went with him. It took them a whole month to reach the capital. En route they played the lovers with unashamed candour in the gaze of the camp entourage. They kissed each other in the halls of holy place with such clamorous smacks that the domed shrines did echo, spent nights at pleasure-houses overcome with hot wines and hotter passion, revelled in frolics as foolish as they were unbecoming, listened to lewd and bizarre songs clasped in each other's arms, gave presents and robes of honours to entertainers who cast decorum aside and did indecent acts and cut indecent jokes without inhibition, watched nude dances by women of ill fame, in fact they did everything that an Emperor and his mistress should not have done. The camp commanders and the lower hierarchy of officials followed their examples. By the time they reached Delhi on 2 June the whole caravan bore the look of drunken merry-makers returning home after a night out. When entering the east gate of the red fort amidst the welcome strains of the *shahnai*, Jahandar told Lal Kanwar, not in a whisper but in a voice loud and clear, "to live is to love". An aged nobleman standing nearby remarked, within the Emperor's hearing, "all reason is against it, and all unhealthy instincts for it". Jahandar gave a wry smile. The nobleman was sent to the gallows the next morning.

The capital buzzed with rumours of an imminent danger. The twenty-nine year-old Farrakh-Siyyar, second son of Azim-ush-Shan, was poised to capture the throne by force. His army had reached Patna from Bengal. Indications were that reinforcements of men and money were coming to him thick and fast. The local chieftains, as also some representatives of the imperial court, had made common cause with him against the voluptuary Jahandar Shah. Zulfiqar Khan made haste to verify these ominous reports, and he prevailed upon the Emperor to send to Agra a force under Aziz-ud-Din for the specific purpose of "maintaining a close watch over developments". Lal Kanwar, assuming the airs of a Nur Jahan, laughed out the proposal as "the bastard son of unnecessary panic", and she told her royal lover not to be swayed by the fears of the Prime Minister. Zulfiqar Khan stood firm in his resolve. In the second week of June, the Emperor signed a *firman* appointing Aziz-ud-Din commander and Khan-i-Dauran deputy commander of an army of fifty thousand men raised "to meet the aggressor, if needed, outside Agra".

The march to Agra of this sizeable force lulled the Emperor and his mistress into believing that all was well. They relapsed into love-making in the gardens, at holy shrines, in the courtyards of mosques, and even in the streets of Delhi, with boundless abandon. Lal Kanwar was desperately in search of a son. She left no ploy unused to realize her wish, but in vain. It seemed the saints and seers whose shrines she desecrated with her voluptuous indecencies were averse to letting the house of Babar degenerate into the house of a harlot's son.

Jahandar Shah was in a way the passive partner in the sins he committed in the names of love and pleasure. For four months Delhi was lit as never before every evening. The banks of Jamuna were illuminated for miles with earthen lamps of infinite artistic variety. Millions of rupees were spent every month on purchase of oil and fireworks. The daily-increasing scarcity of oil could not but snowball into rise in prices of all essential commodities. The spectre of a famine began to haunt the citizens. Choosing not to call a halt to the lighting and other festivities, Lal Kanwar devised a novel way to combat shortages. She would go to different parts of the city in a *rath*, scattering silver and copper coins for the benefit of the poor. It was estimated that her extravagance cost the imperial exchequer roughly a hundred thousand rupees a day. She delighted in watching men and women scramble to collect the coins thrown out by her.

It gave Lal Kanwar pleasure to be a witness to the torment of others. One day Jahandar Shah ordered a fully-loaded boat to be toppled in the middle of the swollen Jamuna to let her see from the roof of the palace eighty innocent travellers struggle in water for their lives. Only nine men were able to swim to the safety of the right bank. The rest were all drowned. Lal Kanwar was never covered by either regret or shame over such distressing events. Beauty made her proud, the art of song and dance made her most admired, and the Emperor made her almost divine, outside the pale of common law and custom.

A story is current to this day in Delhi that one day Jahandar Shah and Lal Kanwar came to the city bazaar in a gold-and-silver *rath* in the style of Lord Shiva and his spouse Parvati. They stopped at many shops, made costly purchases, and lastly went up the stairs of a liquor shop owned by a childhood friend of Lal Kanwar. There they remained till the cocks began to crow. They came down in a state of total inebriation. By the time the *rath* reached the fort both of them were fast asleep. Lal Kanwar was carried to her chamber by a team of four eunuchs. Jahandar Shah remained where he was, fast asleep on the floor of the chariot. The driver,

not knowing that the Emperor had not disembarked, took the vehicle to the garage, disengaged the bullocks, and left for his quarter at the back of the citadel. In the meantime, the palace *khidmatgars* discovered that the Emperor was missing. A hectic search in the fort yielded no result. The Begum Sahiba was aroused from her deep slumber and requested to help solve the mystery. She remembered her lover having fallen to sleep on the floor of the chariot. What happened after that was outside her recollection. The Chamberlain, Ijaz Ahmad Khan, rushed to the *rathkhana* and, lo and behold, the Padshah lay snoring in deep sleep inside the chariot. What next? The driver was hanged in public the following day for neglect of duties. Hindustan had not known before a king like Jahandar Shah.

Given the title Imtiaz Mahal, Lal Kanwar continued to use her feminine lures to keep Jahandar Shah under her influence. In his presence, she acted with consummate skill the role of a devoted partner of his life. Away from him, she was an arrogant, haughty woman who talked to one man, looked at another, and thought of some one else. The imperial staff, from Zulfiqar Khan downwards, were intrigued by her manipulations to secure unprecedented favours from her relatives and friends. Her brother, Niamat Khan, was appointed Governor of Multan without the knowledge of the Prime Minister. His only title to that high post was that he could play the *sarangi* well. This posting was cancelled when Farrakh-Siyyar reached Allahabad, and it became evident that a real crisis was in the offing. The lucrative days of Lal Kanwar were over. Her monthly allowance of rupees twenty million remained unpaid for November and December. The noble mansions allotted to her favourites were taken over for occupation by army commanders and *mansabdars* ordered to come to Delhi with their allotted divisions of men and horses. One of her close friends, Zuhra Banu, a reputed prostitute of Delhi, was ordered by Zulfiqar Khan to leave the city "before the rise of sun the next day" for her having insulted Chin Qitch Khan in public. She brought the order to Lal Kanwar's notice. The latter fretted and fumed, but she failed to get the order rescinded. Zulfiqar Khan threatened an open revolt if Jahandar Shah took any action over his head. The news from Agra was disconcerting, and the Emperor was not in a position to estrange the Prime Minister and his followers. Lal Kanwar gave in. Zuhra left for her village near Panipat well before the appointed hour. The defeat saddened Lal Kanwar. She swore vengeance, saying "There is hope in my heart for as long as there is passion in my voice and lightness in my feet. I will get Zuhra back. The gods of love are on my side".

The scenes hereafter changed rapidly. The climax was as sensational as it was unexpected. There emerged a new type of devilry that hastened the collapse of the empire that Babar built. Lal Kanwars were swept away in the maelstrom of changes that engulfed Hindustan towards the end of the year.

When Farrakh-Siyyar overcame his fears and decided, at the instance of his mother, to avenge the defeat and death of his father near Lahore, he was without money, without friends, without an army and, what was worst, without a reasonable hope of vanquishing Jahandar Shah on the battlefield. His armed force numbered a bare four hundred. The treasure chests were empty. Their gold and silver contents having been sent to Azim-ush-Shan a few months earlier. A majority of *mansabdars* had already pledged their allegiance to his uncle, Jahandar Shah. The Syed brothers* —Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali—had, however, not revealed their hand so far. They were under a debt of gratitude to Azim-ush-Shan; it was because of that Prince's recommendation that Bahadur Shah gave them the administration of Allahabad and Bihar, respectively. Duty beckoned them one way, gratitude another.

On reaching Patna, Farrakh-Siyyar, a picture of conflict that raged within him, threw his turban at the feet of Hussain Ali, saying "imprison me or help me". Tears rolled down his cheeks as he explained the reasons for not accepting the advice of some *umra* to flee either to Bengal or to Persia by sea from the southern peninsula. "The drowning pangs of my father called me. I would be unworthy of being called his son if his death was left unavenged. Lend me your support. Let us wage a holy war against an unholy monarch. If we win, I pledge myself here and now to give you and your brother the two topmost positions in the Empire", he said in a voice vibrating with high emotion. Hussain picked up the prince's turban from the ground, restored it with a show of obedience on his head, and then embraced him in respect and affection due to the son of a benefactor. Farrakh-Siyyar's lamentations had apparently moved the Syed's heart. He did not press his plea further. While taking leave to return to his camp, he first touched Hussain's knee and then raised his

* The Syed brothers, Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali, were descendants of Syed Abul Fateh of Mesopotamia. The latter, along with his twelve sons, migrated to India in the sixteenth century. Initially, they settled near Delhi, later crossed the Jamuna, and made Barha, near Saharanpur, their home. In the reign of Akbar they gained reputation for bravery and courage. The father of Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali was given the title Abdullah Khan Qutb-ul-Mulk by Aurangzeb. He distinguished himself in wars in the Deccan. For his bravery in the batle of Jajau, Hassan Ali was given his father's title (Abdullah Khan) by Bahadur Shah. Both he and Hussain Ali became favourites of Azim-ush-Shan.

hands in prayer. It seemed he had won the preliminary round of the battle ahead.

Next day when the evening was about to close, the mother of Farrakh-Siyyar, a Kashmiri lady of remarkable rectitude and refined manners, called on the mother of Hussain Ali. She presented the Syeda a trayful of fairly rich gifts, and then bared her breasts to underline the distress she had passed through. "We are in your hands. Own us, and we shall be in the heaven of plenty; reject us, and we shall burn in the hell of destitution", she said. The grey-haired, venerable wife of the famed Abdullah Khan held the princess in her arms, gave a holy kiss on her forehead, and comforted her with words of wisdom from the sacred book. Here was a pledge, silent but clear in its meaning: Hussain Ali was not on the side of the enemies of Azim-ush-Shan. An alliance was signed, as it were, with the tears of the two mothers. The princess wore a faint smile as she left. There was hope in her heart. The Syeda's quotations from the Quran gave her confidence and strength. "The throne of Hindustan is yours", she told her son on return to the camp.

To make assurance doubly sure, Farrakh-Siyyar invited Hussain Ali "to sit on my right at a meeting of the commanders in my camp after prayers on Friday next". The shrewd Syed guessed correctly the underlying intent of the prince. He replied:

The silent promises held out by my revered mother are to me more than the commands of God. The Syeds of Barha are with the son of Azim-ush-Shan. It is immaterial whether I sit on your highness's right or left. Our common objective is to defeat the forces of lawlessness that have come to rule the Empire. Insha Allah, we shall succeed in our joint endeavour. Already I have sent a messenger to Allahabad, informing my brother of the understandings reached between us. Mohtrima Syeda has also sent him a letter, written with her own blessed hand, impressing upon him the necessity of restoring sanity in the affairs of state. She has also asked him to raise an army of men strong in faith and righteousness. Holy wars can be fought successfully only with the help of holy men. The more I ponder over the matter, the greater becomes my conviction that our pact will bring us victory. God is on our side. Let us have no fear in our hearts.

On my part, I have initiated steps to raise within a fortnight an army of fifty thousand well-armed men. Plans for advance to Allahabad may be made accordingly. The ladies would be left behind in Patna. Neither Timur nor Babar ever fought wars in the company of women. They were victorious always. We need to follow their example.

This said, I, a humble servant of the Empire, accept your highness's gracious invitation with profound gratitude. It shall give me infinite pleasure to take part in the meeting of commanders.

Meanwhile, Jahandar Shah and Lal Kanwar continued to slip into deeper waters. Animal passion cannot but get its possessor into all sorts of trouble. The two princes, Aziz-ud-Dowla and Muiz-ud-Dowla made no secret of their abhorrence of their father's wanton love-making with a dancing-girl. They were both thrown into prison at the instance of Lal Kanwar. For similar reason, Zulfiqar Khan and his father, Asad Khan, were threatened with serious consequences if they did not desist from "siding with the enemies of Begum Imtiaz Mahal". The rank of Syed Ali Hassan, Governor of Allahabad, was reduced from six to four thousand as he was reported to have passed in public remarks against the brother and brother-in-law of Lal Kanwar. The indignant Syed proclaimed a rebellion, and he wrote to his followers to muster forces for a showdown. Jahandar Shah sent to Allahabad a small force under Ghaffar Khan to "bring the rebels to the path of obedience". The latter was defeated in a sharp skirmish fifty miles from Allahabad, and a jubilant Hassan Ali wrote to the Emperor:

The most degrading ignominy, as the most perfect honour, comes unnoticed by way of women. When I ask Your Majesty to beware of entrusting the affairs of state to a woman who does not command the respect of the people, I speak from considerations of loyalty, not disobedience. It is one thing to be tempted, another to fall. Women have been the root of misfortunes of many illustrious monarchs in the past, the cause of their bitterest pains. They are the mines of suffering, as also of bliss.

The Syeds would not be the loyal servants of the Empire that they are if they did not raise their voice against what had been happening at the court ever since the late Emperor Syed Bahadur Shah repaired to his palace in paradise. The army sent to silence our voice has been beaten. The all-knowing God is on our side. We appeal for restraint against those who protest against what the holy Quran denounces as unpardonable sin. Else, the consequences may not be beneficial for the Empire the merciful Allah threw in Your Majesty's lap a few months ago.

He is a poor king who does not know how to take good advice. Jahandar Shah was beside himself with rage at the threat held out by Hassan Ali.

He ordered Zulfiqar Khan to mount a full-scale invasion of the territories held by the Syed. The Prime Minister counselled restraint because of the reported plans of aggression by Farrakh-Siyyar. Instead, he advised restoration of Hassan Ali's *mansab* and extension of such other honours to him as might prevent him from lending assistance to Farrakh-Siyyar. Jahandar Shah consulted Lal Kanwar who tended to agree that it would be a mistake to alienate Hassan Ali at that stage. The Emperor sent the following letter to Allahabad by the hand of Malik Taj-ud-Din, a senior official of the court:

Considering your loyal services to the Empire in the reigns of the paradise-residing Padshahs Aurangzeb and Bahadur Shah, we are inclined to take a lenient view of your deviation from the path of obedience in the recent past. Great kingdoms can be sustained best by the loyalty and support of their trusted servants. Aware of this advice given by Akbar Padshah to his son, Prince Salim, we have decided to refix your *mansab* at the original six thousand and to assign to you the *suba* of Allahabad in your own right. Also it is our desire to honour you with special robes of distinction at the time of your next visit to the court.

The views expressed by you in the last communication with regard to effective administration are rooted in wisdom derived from the reading of history. We understand and respect the implications of your remarks. At the same time, we would expect from you a similar understanding of our renewal of faith in your abilities.

This forgive-and-forget communication could not deceive the forty-six-year-old Hassan Ali. He dismissed the messenger with only a verbal remark that the Emperor's change of heart was "too late, too unconvincing". Already he had received letters from his brother and his mother from Patna about their decision to support Farrakh-Siyyar. Hassan Ali could disobey God, not his mother. The die was cast. The son of Azim-ush-Shan was to be placed on the throne. There was no place for Jahandar Shah and his "Laloo" in the affairs of Hindustan. The taste of fear was not known to Hassan Ali. He made ready for what he called "the war of liberation". The powerful Jat chiefs of Oudh were on his side. So was Raja Narayan with his ten thousand horse and thirty thousand foot.

The confusion in Delhi worsened as Khan-i-Jahan Ali Murad Khan, foster brother of the Emperor, clashed with Zulfiqar Khan over how best to meet the challenge of Farrakh-Siyyar. The Prime Minister wanted Jahandar Shah to take the field himself outside Agra and stop the invaders

from advancing any further. Ali Murad disagreed with this view. He would like the Emperor to stay on in Delhi and proceed Agra-wards only if the forces of prince Aziz-ud-Din were broken through. The latter option, being less hazardous, gained the Emperor's acceptance. Zulfiqar Khan had to be content with sending reinforcements to Agra. Open disagreement between the two top commanders could not but affect the morale of the imperial forces.

At this time also came to a head the slow, long-simmering hatred of Lal Kanwar by the seniormost lady of the harem, Zeenat-un-Nissa Begum. The latter declined an invitation by the Emperor's mistress to attend an entertainment in honour of a group of dancers and musicians from across the river Sind. The feud took an ugly turn when an enraged Lal Kanwar broke into Zeenat's apartment, called her "the daughter of a puritan pig", and dashed to the ground some art pieces to underline her roaring anger. The sixty-nine-year-old Zeenat-un-Nissa kept her calm, but to no avail. Lal Kanwar continued to fret and fume for some time, and then left in a huff, saying "Never, never, shall I enter this evil-infested room. I loathe conservative hypocrites". Arrangements were made for the daughter of Aurangzeb to leave for Agra the next day. The news of her departure saddened the court, as also the people of Delhi. She was a link between the past and the present, a reminder to the younger generation of the glories of the yesteryear.

On 12 November 1712, the combined forces of Farrakh-Siyyar and Hussain Ali, numbering nearly sixty thousand foot and ten thousand horse, did the bold act of crossing the swollen Ganga by a boat bridge. A number of elephants perished in this hazardous exercise, but that did not affect overmuch the hitting power of the combined army. Once on the other side of the forbidding water-barrier, a jubilant Hussain Ali observed, "I thought it was more difficult to tame the waves of a roaring river". Bubbling over with confidence, he congratulated Farrakh-Siyyar on "the first victory of the battle ahead". Optimism overcame the young prince like a monsoon cloud, and hereafter there never arose in his mind a thought of defeat. The Peacock Throne, he reckoned, was within his grasp. Hussain Ali too was convinced that the race to the finishing post was as good as won. Jahandar Shah, he believed, was too depraved and spineless to meet the challenge. Zulfiqar Khan was, in his calculations, the only possible threat. The stories of his disenchantment with the Emperor, however, lulled his fears. "A disgruntled general is worse than a traitor", he told Farrakh-Siyyar. Comrades in confidence, the two advanced to Allahabad at the head of an army that swelled as it

progressed. Several noblemen indebted to Azim-ush-Shan for one favour or another, made their submission to the prince.

Dissidents from the imperial camp also came in fairly large numbers to serve in the allied forces. Joined by Hassan Ali at Allahabad, the army of Farrakh-Siyyar, now nearing the one hundred thousand mark, jostled along merrily with the fixed aim of capturing Agra before Jahandar Shah arose from his slumber. En route they pillaged villages and towns for money and food. An imperial convoy, carrying revenue collections from the eastern provinces, was pillaged to the last paisa. The goal was to subdue Agra, the means were of little importance. The Syed brothers had staked their all—honour, future and also the past—in deciding to support Farrakh-Siyyar. They would not be satisfied with anything less than complete victory.

To that end, they planted a forged letter (from Lal Kanwar) in the camp of Aziz-ud-Din, who was advancing from Agra towards Allahabad, which read as follows:

I am distressed beyond words to inform that the Emperor attained immortality on 7 November. The end came all of a sudden following an attack of high fever. Frantic efforts were made to save his life, but the omniscient Allah willed otherwise.

In view of developments on the other side of Agra, the Prime Minister and his advisers have chosen to keep this tragic event a closely-guarded secret till such time as the rebellion of Farrakh-Siyyar is trampled underfoot. What may happen after the revolt is put down is hard to guess. A foul whisper is around that the wily Zulfiqar Khan, aided by the more treacherous Subha Chand, is planning to open the gates of the prison in which are lodged Aziz-ud-Dowla and Muiz-ud-Dowla. Apparently, his aim is to seat one of them on the throne and thus bypass your claim for succession. This is a plan too perfidious to be taken lying down.

I would, therefore, urge you in the names of justice and Islamic tradition to make haste to reach Delhi before it becomes too late to take any corrective step. The throne awaits you: it will be in your possession if you move fast. Else.....Heaven forbid!

An unsuspecting Aziz-ud-Din fell into the trap. Already many desertions had taken place in his army. The powerful Jat chiefs, Chabila Ram and Girdhari Lal, marched away to their estates soon after the tents were pitched at Khajwa, the battlefield where Aurangzeb repulsed Shah Shuja nearly half a century ago. Seven other junior commanders were thrown

into prison for their alleged intention to cross over to the enemy as soon as the battle was joined. These desertions caused much concern in the ranks of the imperialists. The two top commanders — Khwaja Hussain (Khan-i-Dauran) and Luftullah Khan did all that was possible to buttress the sagging spirits of the soldiers, but the ugly reality of a depleted army could not be ignored.

Aziz-ud-Din, a poor soldier and a poorer leader of men, was inwardly much relieved when he read the forged communication. "Take duty, loyalty and such other abominations to the dog. I will have none of them", he told his wife, Sayeda Begum (daughter of Badar Bakht) when she tried to dissuade him from the plan to leave for Delhi while the two armies were standing face to face ready for the fight. Her pleas went unheard. Aziz-ud-Din mounted an elephant at the dead of night and fled to Agra. The news of the Prince's departure spread in the camp like wildfire. Confusion bred fear, and fear in turn a retreat ignoble and disorderly. The battle was lost before it began.

The news of this humiliating capitulation gave sleepless nights even to those who could go to sleep in thunder. The Vakil-i-Mulk, Asad Khan, read in the debacle "a message that I dare not carry to the Emperor". The hero of many a sanguine battle, Zulfiqar Khan, made secret plans to flee to his native Persia. The unpredictable Subha Chand gathered all his gold and all his relatives with the intention to hasten to Jaipur if the worse came to worst. In this crisis of confidence, Jahandar Shah alone stood undaunted, and he mocked at those whom fear turned traitors. Courage in a desperate situation is only a species of animal heat. He instituted a war council under Zulfiqar Khan, took steps to raise money for payment to men of the armed forces, sent messengers to friendly chiefs for mobilisation of all available resources of men and war equippage, collected stores of food for a long war, called off dates with musicians and nautch-girls, put a stop to the extravaganza of pleasure-hunt in public and in private, forswore the use of liquor till such time as "the progeny of Azim-ush-Shan is reduced to dust". Promised to God to make amends for his lapses into sin — in fact, he tried to play the Babar before the battle against Rana Sanga. Alas! He possessed neither the dynamism nor the military genius of Babar. His past was too ignoble to inspire his men to deeds of selfless valour. Lal Kanwar still lurked in the wings with allurement in her eyes, her shapely curves and her husky voice. Let it be said that Jahandar Shah wanted to get out of her snares, but he could not. The way she still enlivened his evenings with most-admired disorder was, he confessed, "my despair, my only heaven".

To raise a large army, capable of repulsing the invasion of Farrakh-Siyyar, was no easy task. The festivities of the last five months had denuded the treasury, as also the fort vaults, of large hoards of wealth in money, gold, silver, pearls and jewels, art objects and robes of precious materials. Faced now with a grim situation, Jahandar ordered the removal and sale of gold and silver panellings of the royal apartments, as also of carpets, furnishings, paintings and other precious art pieces in the fort. Nearly fifty thousand silk and brocade dresses of Lal Kanwar were also sold by public auction. The royal cutlery and crockery fetched nearly five million rupees. The situation was indeed desperate. Agra had to be saved whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice. Lal Kanwar realised the gravity of the crisis. She took to auctioning her clothes and other possessions in public herself. At war between short-range and long-range self-love, she opted to side with the latter. She could not change the writ of destiny, the army perhaps could work the miracle. This was her hope, her dream. She backed Jahandar Shah's fund-raising effort to her last petticoat.

Calculated self-interest, not faithfulness, led Lal Kanwar to invest what she possessed in what she aimed at possessing. Her eyes were set fast on wearing the tiara of an empress. Victory over Farrakh-Siyyar was essential for the achievement of that ambition. She loved music, dance and wine; she loved more diamonds, rubies and the imperial insignia. The long habit of living in palaces had bred in her a strong will never to go out of them. She was a beautiful woman. She knew full well the advantages of that endowment of nature. Chance had thrown her in the arms of an Emperor. Whatever the sacrifice, she was hell-bent on not losing him. Chance had brought her where she was, chance could also raise her higher in the hierarchy of the harem. Women live by guile and hope. Lal Kanwar was a woman first, then a concubine. Her sights were straight, her instincts intact. She knew what was what, and that is more than what could be said about a majority of ladies in luck. She was not cast in the mould of common women.

Astrologers are in a way the staff of weak minds. Jahandar Shah, keen to be on the right side of the sun, the stars and the moon, consulted many well-known Muslim and non-Muslim occultists before fixing the date for march to Agra. The chief among them was Hazrat Nizam Nizami who put his finger on 9 December as the most propitious day for departure from Delhi. Jahandar Shah accepted his reading as the most trustworthy. He went up the golden howdah of his elephant Sarbland at the exact hour, a little past midnight, fixed by Nizami, and took the road to Agra at the

head of a mammoth *lashkar* comprising nearly a hundred thousand men. Lal Kanwar, wearing a light armour over her dress of pink and yellow silk, followed the Emperor on another majestic elephant Sikandar. It took nearly eight hours for the last column of cavalry to pass through the Delhi gate where swarmed musicians and trumpet players to bid the army godspeed. Zulfiqar Khan, in the capacity of *Mashir-i-Aala* (chief adviser) rode a resplendent steed in the middle of the cavalcade. The ageing Asad Khan was left behind in supreme command of the city. The defences of Agra were placed in the charge of Chin Qitch Khan, son of Ghias-ud-Din Khan.

Intense cold and rain hampered somewhat the pace of this huge conglomeration of men, horses, elephants and the beasts of burden. The camp at the midway stage was eight miles in circumference. Jahandar Shah inspected some divisions under the command of senior generals, and he found the men and officers in good heart. It was here that the royal umbrella atop the howdah of the Emperor's elephant was caught in the branches of a tree and one of its fifty-one strings of pearls was lost — an incident considered by many as a bad omen. However, Nizami saw in the loss nothing bút a mischance unrelated to the result of the battle ahead. Jahandar gave him a robe of distinction for "the wise act of countering with truth the apprehensions of a section of the camp".

Hereafter, Jahandar Shah took some omens, like Humayun Padshah used to do before an engagement, but none of them turned out to be "in conflict with the goal of the campaign". Nizami had reason enough to be pleased at what he called "the affirmations by nature that victory will kiss the stirrup of the Emperor". Making a steady progress, the army reached Agra on 29 December 1712. The population gave the Emperor and his entourage a warm welcome with drums and trumpets and songs that invoked the merciful Allah for victory.

After only a night's halt at Agra, the Emperor moved to Samugarh, the famous battle-ground where Aurangzeb got the better of Dara Shikoh in 1658. Some wondered if history would repeat itself and give victory to the rebel prince. Lal Kanwar broke the oriental tradition of modesty when she caught and kissed Jahandar as the latter was about to make what turned out to be his last elephant ride as Emperor. Her wanton passion shocked many, surprised everybody present. She stood there unconcerned about what others thought of her act. She had done what she thought would please her lover. She lived to please one who, she thought, would make her one day the Empress of Hindustan. Jahandar Shah gave

her a gentle pat on the neck, and mounted the steps to the howdah of the waiting tusker.

The surging waters of the Jamuna lay between the two armies. The van of the allied force was under the command of Hassan Ali Abdullah Khan who made several diversionary movements to draw the imperial army out of their position of advantage on raised ground. Zulfiqar Khan, *de facto* supremo on the other side, did not swallow the bait; he preferred to wait till the rebels would run out of patience and launch an assault despite the Jamuna, despite rain and intense cold, and despite the known superiority of the royal army in artillery fire-power. The stalemate lasted for nearly a week during which period all that happened was a few probing attacks by either side. Long-distance gun duels told of a battle ahead, nothing else. It seemed the two armies were evenly poised, each depending for victory on the other's mistakes. The festival of Id was celebrated on 7 January with an undeclared ceasefire and the usual exchange of greetings by the opposing commanders. On this day, Farrakh-Siyyar took the initiative to send an envoy to his uncle with the following communication:

On this holy day, I salute, with respect in my heart, all those who have had the privilege of sitting on the throne of Hindustan since Babar Padshah in 1526 emerged victorious in the battle of Panipat. The House of Babar is legitimately proud of its achievements, its glory and the contribution it has made to the civilisation of this ancient land. It has fought many intra-family wars in the last one hundred eighty-six years, and on every such occasion it emerged stronger than before. Allah willed it that way.

Now that our two armies are poised for a battle grim and furious, let us hope and pray that the *Khandan-i-Mughalia* will come out stronger, more dynamic, and more resplendent than ever before. We have taken up arms not for ourselves, but for the splendour of the dynasty we have the privilege to belong. Allah knows best. He may give victory to the side which, in His benign calculations, will enhance the prestige of the Mughals. I shall be glad to lose if, in His judgement, it would be beneficial that you should win.

In that faith I invite you to come out and fight. Let the sword decide the issue. The Empire awaits the result of our conflict.

Jahandar Shah received the envoy with courtesy. He made no reply to the communication. Lal Kanwar sat by his side, her one eye on the envoy, the other on her lover. She too read the communication. Her response was a

feigned smile which was usually much bigger than the spontaneous, genuine variety. Jahandar looked at her for a cue to her thoughts. She remained passive. Not finding words to match Farrakh-Siyyar's, he ended the audience with just "well, well, well".

Four days later, Farrakh-Siyyar took courage in both his hands and crossed the Jamuna on an elephant. Abdullah Khan had gone across the river the previous day with four hundred men. The rest of the army followed Farrakh-Siyyar by way of a ford a few miles upstream. The battle was joined by midday with Hussain Ali launching a fierce attack on the left of the imperial army. The brunt of this assault was borne by Kokaltash Khan who, from all accounts, gave a splendid display of heroism and controlled aggression after the initial pressure had eased somewhat. As was customary with Syeds, Hussain Ali fought on foot without armour, without fear of life. Badly wounded, he was carried off the field before Kokaltash, sword in hand, could steer his horse in a position to sever his head.

The opening round thus went to the imperialists. Thereafter, the fighting flared up in all sectors, now one side and then the other claiming the upper hand. When the evening was about to shut, a rumour spread that both Abdullah Khan and Hussain Ali had died of wounds received earlier in the day. Zulfiqar Khan was jubilant at what he exclaimed was the "extinguishing of our two worst enemies". He ordered the victory drums to be beaten. The joy in the imperial ranks was, however, short-lived. Shortly afterwards, there came the shock-news of the Turani contingents under Chin Qitch Khan having crossed over to the enemy. Misfortunes seldom come alone on a battlefield. The dauntless Kokaltash was killed in a hair-raising duel with the Jat plunderer Churaram. That was not all. The elephant on which rode Jahandar Shah bolted away after being hit by a volley of arrows let by the followers of Abdullah Khan. The Emperor managed somehow to come down the beast and, in a moment of dense confusion, did the crucial mistake of jumping onto the back of a horse brought to him by Subha Chand. As had happened many times before in the history of Hindustan, the battle was lost when the men lost sight of the Emperor. The word went round that Jahandar Shah was killed in action. The imperial war machine suddenly came to a halt. Zulfiqar Khan stood where he was thinking, praying, hoping and perhaps also counting the number of his followers. He knew he was beaten.

At this moment of destiny, there appeared on the scene, as if from nowhere, Lal Kanwar in search of one who held the key to her future, her ambitions, and her very existence. When she saw Jahandar Shah on the

back of a horse, she rushed to him in the manner of a long-separated bride, motioned him to come down the mount, laid upon his cheek a zealous kiss, and virtually bade him to get quickly in the howdah of her elephant. There was no time to lose. The enemy were crowding in on them. Jahandar Shah wanted to disobey her command, but he could not muster the courage to give a rebuff to the glance which had in it love, passion, anxiety and all the charms of a dexterous concubine. He mounted the elephant. By him sat Lal Kanwar. Before anybody knew what had happened, the two fled to Agra. Aziz-ud-Din was known to have taken the same route a little earlier. The battle was lost. "God willed it that way", he comforted Lal Kanwar.

Zulfiqar Khan was the last to leave. He played for a while with the idea of launching a desperate assault on Farrakh-Siyyar, capture him bodily, and then resume the fight-back with his twenty-five thousand followers. The plan was too reckless, too hazardous, to merit serious consideration. He too left as the sound of victory trumpets from the enemy side struck his ears. The twelfth of January turned out to be a sad day in the lives of Jahandar Shah and Lal Kanwar.

Jahandar Shah took to driving the elephant himself when the *mahaout*, bleeding from many points, fainted shortly after leaving Samugarh. The noble animal, sensing perhaps the gravity of circumstances, set a hectic pace, covering nearly seventy rough miles before the rising sun signalled caution. It was essential to take cover during the hours of day light. The house of Azam Khan, located amidst a thick mango-grove outside the town of Talpat, suggested itself. Thither the Emperor went and, to his surprise and delight, found the loyal Khan already in the house nursing his wounds. While Lal Kanwar rested in the *zenana*, the two men discussed plans for the onward journey to Delhi. The royal elephant had to be discarded, it was agreed. Travel by a ramshackle bullock-cart, the Khan suggested, was the only means to combine safety with secrecy. Jahandar Shah shaved off his beard and moustache, and he put himself in the loose robes of a rural fakir. Lal Kanwar was given to wear the clothes of a *banjaran*, complete with dust, dirt and a half-torn *dopatta*. Azam Khan offered to accompany them in the garb of a cart-driver.

The trio set out on their long journey as soon as the darkness spread its wings over the countryside. Intense cold and the shortage of cooked food made the rough going very rough, and let it be said that but for Lal Kanwar's acts of gay abandon as a *banjaran* the party might never have progressed with such eventless speed as they did. Despite extreme privations and despite their minds being preoccupied with the uncer-

tainty of future, they reached the outskirts of Delhi by mid-day on 19 January. There they waited for dusk by the walls of a weather-beaten mud farmhouse. When the sun had descended down the depths of the west, Lal Kanwar went straight to her mansion by the side of Jamuna. Jahandar Shah was escorted by Azam Khan to the villa of Vakil-i-Mulk Asad Khan. Zulfiqar Khan had already found refuge in his father's residence two days earlier.

The shrewd Asad Khan received the defeated monarch with a show of such studied indifference as chilled the heart of Jahandar Shah. It was nearly an hour before the Emperor was invited to partake of a simple, five-dish meal, and then to rest for the night in the apartment reserved for honoured guests. A strong guard was deployed all round the villa ostensibly for reasons of security, but in actuality to prevent "the escape to freedom of one who can be used with advantage to gain the favour of Farrakh-Siyyar". Jahandar Shah was a prisoner.

During the night a heated argument was reported to have taken place between Asad Khan and Zulfiqar Khan. The latter wanted the Emperor to be sent immediately either to Lahore, Multan or Kabul. He also hinted at the Deccan where his deputy, Daud Khan, could be depended upon to help Jahandar Shah stage a comeback. The Prime Minister wanted the defences of the capital to be strengthened, and then to find ways to check the advance of Farrakh-Siyyar. The old fox, Asad Khan, would not listen to the pleas of his son. "The abstractions like loyalty, courage and honesty will not stop Farrakh-Siyyar", Asad Khan asserted with a show of firmness that left Zulfiqar groping for words to counter the argument. Neither did he expand nor press his point further. They agreed silently that to repulse Farrakh-Siyyar after his victory at Samugarh would be a degree of the impossible.

The next step was to put fetters around the legs of their prize prisoner, and to send him to an apartment in the fort. Lal Kanwar was permitted to join him, not from considerations of their love but because, reckoned Asad Khan, the chains of passion would get them reconciled to the chains of steel. He was not wrong in his arithmetic. When Jahandar Shah took Lal Kanwar in his arms, he exclaimed: "This is heaven. The fetters seem to have fallen off my legs". Then they kissed away the defeat and their fears. Imprisonment together was to them dearer than freedom in separateness. Though they hoped to live, yet they were prepared to die.

The vanquished Emperor safe in their custody, Asad Khan and Zulfiqar sent to the victor a joint letter of submission, hoping that Farrakh-Siyyar would forget their hostility to him and remember only

their services to his grandfather and great grandfather. The communication ran, in part, as follows:

As loyal servants of the Empire, we fought on the side of Emperor Jahandar Shah. In the self-same spirit, we render homage to the victor and place our services unreservedly at his disposal. The great Alamgir bequeathed to his successors in his last will an unqualified opinion about our merits and our loyalty. His recommendation was clear and emphatic. Our concept of duty and faithfulness transcends individuals; it encompasses instead the whole dynasty of kings who have ruled this country for nearly two hundred years. In the conviction that victory and defeat are the dispensations of God, we bow our heads in obedience, and hope that our submission will be considered a measure of our commitment to promote the interests of the Empire.

The defeated Emperor, Jahandar Shah, and his much-loved companion Begum Lal Kanwar Sahiba, are in our custody. They will be handed over at appropriate time to the agents of the throne. Our duty is done. The rest is in the hand of the All-knowing Allah.

Meanwhile, Farrakh-Siyyar crowned himself Emperor at a simple ceremony outside Agra. His throne was a wooden platform covered with a dirty, moth-eaten carpet. All his baggage was pillaged by Jat adventurers who hovered around Samugarh in expectation of opportunities for loot. It was a day after the coronation that Asadullah Khan produced a duplicate of the royal tent, and pitched it for Farrakh-Siyyar at the place where stood Jahandar's tent before the battle got underway. It was here that the communication from Asad Khan was received. In victory, Farrakh-Siyyar waxed generous, and he issued a proclamation pardoning Asad Khan and his son. Robes of honour were sent to them by the hand of a special messenger. Promises of suitable posts in keeping with their status and past services were also held out. Farrakh-Siyyar specifically ordered the Vakil-i-Mulk to keep a close watch on Jahandar Shah and not let him slip out of Delhi.

Asad Khan had reason to be pleased with the success of his plan. He waited anxiously for the arrival in capital of the new Emperor. His hopes soared still higher when Abdullah Khan, reaching Delhi in advance of the Emperor, assured him of Farrakh-Siyyar's intention to retain him in the post he held in the previous reign. The case of Zulfiqar Khan fell in a different category. Abdullah Khan was discreetly silent about the fate that awaited him. However, he held out many a half-pledge to do

whatever he could to save his honour and prestige. The elder Syed insisted that Asad Khan should allay his son's fears and not do anything injudicious pending the Emperor's arrival.

Farrakh-Siyyar left for Delhi on 22 January 1713. No one knew of the fires of revenge that burnt fiercely within him. Outwardly he kept a calm, benevolent posture. Not even Hassan Ali, Prime Minister-designate, knew anything about the young Emperor's intentions. It was only on reaching the suburbs of Delhi in the first week of February that some indication became available of the turmoil in his heart. He chose Taqarrab Khan, a leader of the Turani party, not Hussain Ali, to escort Asad Khan for an audience with him. The junior Syed was known to be an old-time protege of Asad Khan and, as such, he could not be expected to carry out the plot that had taken shape in the Emperor's head.

The former Vakil-i-Mulk, resplendent in his robes of gold and silk, was ushered in the audience tent by Taqarrab Khan with high words of praise for the Persian nobleman's services to the Mughals. Farrakh-Siyyar stood up to receive him, held the aged Vizir for a while in his arms, and then proceeded to gird around his slender waist a replica of the sword of Timur — a honour seldom bestowed before on one other than a prince of the royal family. Asad Khan glowed in self-satisfaction, felicitated the Emperor in chaste Persian on "being chosen by the Supreme Authority to wear the crown that once adorned the heads of the Emperors Akbar, Shah Jahan and Aurangzeb", presented to the monarch a 'nazrana' of a thousand gold coins, and in the end sought permission for his son, Zulfiqar Khan, "to make obeisance at the royal threshold and seek forgiveness for his sins".

Farrakh-Siyyar had no hesitation to agree to Asad Khan's request. Zulfiqar Khan was brought in, his hands tied together behind his back. He also wore a black scarf around his neck. The Emperor looked at his adversary at Samugarh with one benevolent and another suspicious eye. He asked the escorting guardsman to unchain his hands. Thereafter, Zulfiqar Khan did the prescribed courtesies of the hands and the tongue, and waited seven paces from the throne for what the monarch had to say to him. Farrakh-Siyyar walked up to him, undid the black sash, spoke to him a few words of comfort, and left to do homage at the shrine of Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Aulia. Asad Khan went with him. Zulfiqar Khan stayed back in the custody of Taqarrab Khan. Trays of food for the former Prime Minister were sent by Abdullah Khan. The Chamberlain suggested that it would not be proper to sit in the Audience tent for a meal. He and Taqarrab Khan offered to escort Zulfiqar Khan to an ante-tent linked to

the Hall of Audience by a corridor of canvas. No sooner did Zulfiqar Khan enter the corridor than the canvas roof fell on him, and instantly nearly two hundred gendarmes, standing outside, carried him away to the camp prison. Zulfiqar Khan lay hungry in chains as his father raised his hands in prayer at the Dargah. The hour of nemesis was at hand.

On 11 February, the Emperor sent for Zulfiqar Khan, and he asked him the following questions which left no doubt in Zulfiqar's mind that his end was near:

Q. "Why did you imprison Kam Baksh?"
A. "I had no authority to imprison the prince. What I did was at the orders of his father, Emperor Aurangzeb. Nobody could dare disobey the great Alamgir."
Q. "Why did you desert Azam Shah?"
A. "It was not desertion, but the acceptance of a reality. Shah Alam's claim to the throne was rooted in strength and tradition."
Q. "Why did you slay my brother, Karim Baksh?"
A. "An answer can be given only by the then Emperor. I was only an agent of his will."
Q. "Why did you put to the sword and tortured hundreds of innocent noblemen?"
A. "This is an irrelevant question. The age we live in is against us. Self-survival is a callous task-master. You are going to kill me..Why? You will not find it easy to answer that poser on the Day of Judgement. The great Judge will laugh at your helplessness."

This was enough. The waiting guards strangled him to death. His head was severed with a single blow of the sword. The body was dragged out of the tent, and left unattended there for hours before it was tied to the tail of a horse in the Emperor's cavalcade to Delhi. Asad Khan rode a *palki* in the self-same procession. A fearsome soldier, riding a horse by the side of Asad Khan's palanquin, carried Zulfiqar Khan's head on the point of his long spear. When the procession reached the fort, Asad was taken to a small house near the Badshahi mosque and asked to "rest here for the remaining years of your life". All his properties were confiscated, and from his mansion on the bank of the Jamuna gold and other valuables worth nearly five million rupees were transferred to the Imperial treasury. In deep anguish, the aged nobleman cried aloud "Ibrahim made of Ismail a sacrifice" —a poignant reference to the fate of his son. This spontaneous outburst also recorded the year of Zulfiqar's death, Asad

Khan was a Persian scholar of no mean merit. He died at the age of eighty-eight on 13 June 1716.

The day on which was strangled to death Zulfiqar Khan was also the last day of the life of Jahandar Shah. Just after the sunset, a dozen armed men entered his apartment and put a black rope around his neck. Lal Kanwar screamed and clung desperately to the body of her lover. It did not take long to separate her and then drag her by the hair down the staircase. Thereafter, the leader of the gang gave a twist at the black rope. Jahandar's lips trembled, his eye-balls rolled, and the next second he sucked his last breath. Then his head was cut, washed, and placed on a tray for presentation to Farrakh-Siyyar. The latter ordered it to be paraded through the city on a pole stuck to the howdah of an elephant. The trunk was carried similarly atop another elephant.

Three days later, on 14 February, Jahandar was buried in the eastern wall of the tomb of Humayun. Zulfiqar Khan was consigned to dust near a gateway to the same tomb. Some years later, Syed Hussain Ali built a modest tomb over the grave — a show of gratitude to one who was mainly responsible for his rise to high office at the court.

Thus ended the 325-day reign of Jahandar Shah. He lived on what he called in one of his few political compositions "this beautiful earth inhabited by the fair progeny of Adam and Eve" for fifty-five years, four months and six days — an age at which most people in medieval times looked to God for a painless end. The passion-powered Jahandar Shah, a few days before he turned fifty-five, rolled down the velvety slope of a hill with Lal Kanwar in his arms. The years did not seem to lessen his ardour for full life. Perhaps this extra octane in his blood came from youthful verve of the woman he loved with his heart and soul. All women are ambitious naturally, but Lal Kanwar was more so as she saw in Jahandar Shah a ladder that could take her right to the top. She used all her feminine charms and all her gifts of song and dance to keep Jahandar's lusts from languishing as a result of starvation. At times the reason in Jahandar took control, but passion asserted itself the moment Lal Kanwar appeared on the scene.

Jahandar's passion combined with unlimited power could not but produce thunder and ruin. In the ten months he sat on the throne, the imperial treasuries became empty, dissatisfaction spread throughout the realm, bureaucratic inefficiency bred widespread corruption, peace gave way to turmoil, the ethos of production atrophied for lack of adequate incentives, foodgrains and other necessities became increasingly scarce, rioting and rebellions raised their heads in rural areas — in fact, the state

became a microcosm of the wanton frivolities of the Emperor and his lady-love.

The two men who kept the Empire together while it was passing through a period of grave imbalance were Asad Khan and his son, Zulfiqar Khan. They became too drunk with power to think of the good of the common man. Jahandar Shah became virtually a puppet in their hands, and the result was a network of jealousies at the top, centre and the bottom rung of the official hierarchy. Few tears were shed at the fate that ultimately befell them. Even history will not forgive them the manner in which they forsook the hand of Jahandar Shah after Samugarh. For them, disloyalty was not a compulsive, stray act, but a trade. The price they paid for their unthinking opportunism was heavy. Allah may for a while forget, but He seldom forgives. One of the chastening lessons of Mughal history is the supremacy of the law of retribution in human affairs.

Farrakh-Siyyar

Chapter 9

PRINCE OF DARKNESS

THE new-born daylight of 12 February 1713, contained within it what may be called the middle-winter's spring. The toothless cold could not but encourage the people of Delhi to come out in their thousands to watch the new Emperor enter the capital in state. It had been announced the previous day by the beat of drum that "with the grace of the Almighty Allah, the Emperor of Hindustan, Abul Muzaffar Muin-ud-Din Muhammad Farrakh-Siyyar Baksh, will enter the hallowed city by the Delhi Gate tomorrow at the auspicious hour of three and a half *gharis* after sunrise".

The spectacle promised a feast for the eye, the heart and also the curiosity of a population that had over the last several days heard endless stories about the youthful victor's love of pageantry, generosity and his good looks. It was said that Farrakh-Siyyar was made "when nature, after a period of apprenticeship, had become a skilful mistress of the fine art of body-building". He was tall, highboned, broad-chested, handsome in all respects and, what was more, a devout Muslim proud of his ancestry. An Emperor in the Middle Ages was either a God or a wolf. The people wanted to see for themselves the elements that went in the composition of the new Padshah. They wanted to see for themselves the second son of the valiant Azim-ush-Shan. It was, therefore, not surprising that large crowds gathered at all points of vantage on the route from Delhi Gate to the Fort.

Astrologers guided the steps of most Mughal kings. Even the strong-willed Aurangzeb did not dare defy the probabilities that lurked behind the courses of the planets and other heavenly bodies. Though he did not make a noise about his obedience to the moon and the stars, yet he was known seldom to have rebelled against the authority of those who claimed knowledge of the "moods of God's agents in the sky". Neither

in war nor in peace would he ever put himself unnecessarily in a camp believed to be unblessed by Providence. He lived to win, and he was, therefore, averse to taking even unreasonable chances in the achievement of his goal. It is, however, a different story that the few court astrologers in his reign always found the signals of Allah to coincide with the wishes of Alamgir!

Farrakh-Siyyar was, in comparison, weak-minded and vulnerable to doubts. His faith in star-gazers was in proportion to his lack of faith in himself and his advisers. It revealed a significant facet of his character that twenty-one leading astrologers, drawn from all religions and all parts of the realm, led the royal cavalcade and that they entered the Delhi Gate precisely at the hour declared auspicious. The guns boomed and the bands struck victory tunes as a contingent of Aahidi horsemen, splendidly dressed in gold and silver uniforms, passed majestically through the gate. Then came the famed elephant Sarbland, a picture of strength and courage in its red and blue drapery, on which sat in a gilded howdah Farrakh-Siyyar, looking a victor in every part of his fair face. The most elegant of youthful accomplishments—a smile that hid nothing—was much in evidence to the general joy of the crowds. In the hind seat of the howdah sat Mir Jumla, a Turanian* nobleman seemingly conscious of the place of honour given him in the procession. Time wrote no wrinkle on his light brown visage, and the robes of honour he was dressed in added to his natural poise and dignity. He held in his hand a fan of peacock feathers which he wafted now and again over the head of the Emperor.

Close behind the column of royal bodyguard that followed Sarbland, there ambled a miserable-looking elephant on whose bare back sat a heavy-weight, hideous specimen of mankind carrying aloft the head of Jahandar Shah at the point of a long, unpolished bamboo. This grim sight was a reminder that "God alone is", and that lust and vanity could not but lead man to destruction. Many old persons shed tears at the gruesome spectacle, and they invoked Allah in loud and clear voices for mercy and forgiveness. The surge of sorrow quickly overcame the ripples of joy that first enveloped the multitude. Even the beggars halted in their quest for the coins that were thrown out from over the head of the Emperor. One old woman, grey of hair but alert of wit, called aloud to Farrakh-Siyyar

*The nobility in the reign of Aurangzeb came to be divided into four distinct parts—Persians, Afghans, Turani Mughals and Hindis. Those who had their ancestral roots in the north of the river Oxus were known as Turanis. Rivalries among these groups took an alarming turn with the weakening of central authority after the death of Aurangzeb.

to stop and listen to what she had to say. To the general amazement of the processionists, the Emperor called a halt, and beckoned to the woman to come nearer and "let me share your thoughts". Amidst a thick hush, the woman spoke thus:

Praise be to the Padshah Salamat for acceding to the request of an insignificant person like me. I will be brief and to the point. Public display of the head of Jahandar Shah will please only those who consider vengeance as the only effective instrument for good governance. Forget not, O'King of Hindustan, that the person who wreaks vengeance only keeps his own wounds green. Forgiveness is the highest virtue of a ruler. Kill a rival, if you will, but do not insult him. Vengeance to God alone belongs. Forgive me, Sire, when I say that *badla* is the delight of little minds. In taking revenge a man is but even with his enemy, but in passing it over he is greater. The great Maulana Rum wrote that "revenge is barren; it feeds on its own dreadful self".

I beg of you, Zil-i-Subhani, that the head of Jahandar Shah is taken down from its lofty perch and interned with honour in a grave suited to the majesty of Mughal Emperors. The holy Prophet will honour you for that high-minded act of forgiveness. I have said what Allah prompted me to say. May you rule over this country for long.

This sermon in Islamic principles irked Syed Abdullah Khan who broke the line and came up trotting hard on his magnificent horse to the side of Sarbland, and he submitted to the Emperor that the time was running out fast and that to keep date with the auspicious hour it was only right that "the lunacies of the lunatic are not permitted to disrupt the schedule of the coronation ceremonial". Without waiting for Farrakh-Siyyar's reaction, he ordered the woman to be removed bodily from the route of the cavalcade, and he gestured to the commander of the procession to continue the march. No more was seen the smile that the Emperor beamed earlier. He was pensive, almost sad, as the woman was carried away unceremoniously by a team of soldiers. Abdullah Khan was the authority behind the throne. Farrakh-Siyyar merely sat on it as did the gods of yore on their golden pedestals.

Later in the day while leading Farrakh-Siyyar to the Peacock Throne, Abdullah Khan held, as it were, an eel by the tail. To ascend the multi-million rupee throne of Shah Jahan was to be reminded that he was the master, not the slave, of the Syeds. A conflict raged within him at the moment of the final triumph. His only wife, Fakhr-un-Nissa Begum,

daughter of the high-pedigree Persian nobleman, Sadat Khan, read correctly her husband's mood when he repaired to her apartment after the crowning ceremony. Were it not for the over-ambition of the servants of the state, there would be no distress, she told him in a voice that seemed to know more than he did. Farrakh-Siyyar was taken aback at this divination of his thoughts, and he asked the twenty four-year-old Fakhr if she possessed "the key to the secrets of my head and my heart". She bent low her shapely head, and spoke nothing. The Emperor came close to her, and repeated the question in a voice more tender and more puzzled. Without looking up, she said: "I am a woman, my lord of this world and the next. Adam was to Eve an open book. This was god's way of bringing about oneness between the two". Farrakh-Siyyar's heart gladdened at this succinct enunciation of the role of woman in the scheme of nature. He praised Fakhr for her intuitive wisdom, and he gave her a loving hug and confessed that woman in many ways was superior to man. They never talked about Abdullah Khan again. Farrakh-Siyyar knew that Fakhr knew what he knew.

The next day, 13 February 1713, in the first darbar of the reign inside the "paradise that is Diwan-i-Am", Farrakh-Siyyar bestowed on Abdullah Khan the title Qutb-ul-Mulk, Yamin-ud-Dowla, Zaffar Jang, Sipah Salar, Yar-i-Wafadar — an exercise in self-preservation that surprised nobody and deceived none. The elder Syed thus became virtually a regent, controller of the destiny of the Emperor and the Empire. High honours had in them invariably more than met the eye.

The younger brother, Hussain Ali Khan, was raised to the post of first Bakhshi with the title Umadat-ul-Mulk, Amir-ul-Umra, Firoz Jang, Sipah Sirdar. Never before in the history of the Mughals had two brothers attained such eminence as did the Syeds Hassan and Hussain within a few months. They perhaps saw in this sudden turn of fortune the God's decree to establish in Hindustan a new dynasty of rulers. If the Surs could replace Humayun, why could not the Syeds snatch the throne from Farrakh-Siyyar? They chose for the time to wait for mistakes by the young, unpredictable Emperor. Meanwhile, they concentrated on raising large, personal armies and winning over to their side the loyalties of conservative supporters of the Mughals. The battle thus began for the minds of the influential segment of the front-rank *umra*. Farrakh-Siyyar was aware of the plans of what came to be known as the Syed party, but there was nothing he could do to check their soaring ambitions. He too decided to wait for an opportunity to clip their wings and restore what Khafi Khan called "the balance of power needed for governance without fear or

favour"

Faithfulness and loyalty are two frail things. In the post-Alamgir period, these values of the spirit degenerated into wares of trade in the hands of men hell-bent on reaching the top by whatever route available. The story of the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar is the story of this rush to the summit in which many fortunes were lost and many more lives trampled underfoot. In the end, Farrakh-Siyyar himself paid the ultimate penalty for being "tortuous as hell and instable as the grave".

As a minor counterpoise to the ascendancy of the Syed brothers, Farrakh-Siyyar bestowed additional honours and jagirs on the Afghan Luftullah Khan and the Turanian Muhammad Amin Khan Chin. They were both blue-blooded imperialists, rich in tact and experience, and comparatively young. Their distrust of the Syeds stemmed principally from the conviction that absolute power in their hands could not but lead in stages to instability, chaos and insurrection. Muhammad Amin, shrewder of the two, was reported to have told the Emperor that "whosoever trusts the Syeds ploughs the wind and sows in the forbidding barrenness of the sea". Farrakh-Siyyar gave a knowing smile, made no comment, and went on to praise the apples of Qandhar, a consignment of which had arrived that very day! Even the Emperor had to make sure that his tongue and the heart lived apart. The network of espionage spread by the high Vizir and his brother, both inside and outside the palace, was ingenius, both in range and technique, wrote Khafi Khan. It was, therefore, understandable that such decisions as in any way impinged on the authority of the Syeds were taken in the course of hunting expeditions. In fact, whenever the Emperor ordered preparations for a hunt, expectations arose in the imperial camp that plans were afoot for the ouster of the Syeds! It was believed that nearly every woman in the royal harem was a spy and every slave-girl an informer.

Just as when a street girl kisses, you count your teeth, so did Farrakh-Siyyar call a roll-call of his forces whenever a Syed waxed eloquent in praise of any act he took or intended to take. Qutb-ul-Mulk was one day all smiles when the Emperor apprised him of his intention to appoint a brother-in-law of Luftullah Khan to the post of Supreme Commander in the Deccan. This was one of the very few appointments of Governor on which the Vizir agreed with the suggestion of the Emperor. Farrakh-Siyyar saw in this agreement a snake lurking somewhere. The decision was changed the next day. The post was given to the forty-two-year-old Qitch Khan, son of late Ghazi-ud-Din Khan. The new Supremo was given the title Nizam-ul-Mulk. A cousin of Amin Khan, Chin Qitch Khan was

a dyed-in-the wool Turani, and as such he was expected to keep the Deccan safe from the long arm of the Vizir.

Another nobleman, destined to achieve some sort of greatness in the reigns of Farrakh-Siyyar and his successors was Khan-i-Dauran, whose ancestors came to Hindustan from Badakhshan in the middle of the seventeenth century. He carried with a degree of pride the badge of being a Naqshbandi by sect — an inheritance that could not but bring him into conflict with the Syed brothers. Though he was nearly a decade older in age than Farrakh-Siyyar, yet he had shared in ample measure the new monarch's outdoor activities in Bengal and Bihar. Both were fond of such sport as wrestling, archery, hunting and horse riding — a common interest that often results in more lasting friendships than those imbibed behind the stone walls of a palace or a pleasure-house.

Farrakh-Siyyar, when he was eighteen, was saved by the Khan from what looked like the jaws of certain death while out hunting in the jungle around Rajmahal. Seeing the prince within the leaping range of a tiger, he shot the animal dead before it made up its mind to take the jump. Farrakh-Siyyar never forgot that he owed his life to the intrepid Naqshbandi musketeer, and when destiny won him the crown he was at pains to express his gratitude by bestowing on the Khan honours and titles far beyond his rank of two thousand five hundred. His influence at the court grew rapidly, so much so that Qutb-ul-Mulk pressed for his transfer as Governor to one of the distant provinces. Farrakh-Siyyar resisted the demand for as long as he could, but in the end sent his *Dost-i-Danishwar* first to Patna and then for a short while to Ahmedabad.

Khan-i-Dauran, wrote a British traveller Arthur Young, was one of those rare noblemen who neither swore at a insult nor sought immediate revenge, but merely laughed it out as something unworthy of attention. "An honourable rejoinder was the only means he ever used to clear his name", he said. This restraint was a rarity in an age in which vengefulness was a virtue and forbearance a sin unpardonable. In one of his many letters to the Emperor, wrote Khan-i-Dauran: "It is in the nature of foul recrimination to end up in disaster, and it cannot be saved from destruction even if it tries a thousand times". Farrakh-Siyyar, who at times essayed in the field of poetry, replied in verse: "O' friend of the childhood, I agree with what you say. Submission without honesty has oftener raised man to glory than honesty without submission".

On accession, as was customary, the Emperor presented to his wife, Fakhr-un-Nissa, fifty-one pieces of pearl-and-diamond jewellery and a

jagir for life worth rupees five hundred thousand a year. To their daughter*, Badshah Begum, who later married Muhammad Shah and became known in history as Malka-i-Zamani, he gave a jagir worth a quarter million rupees and twenty-one pieces of costly jewellery. Other members of the royal family were also given appropriate presents of land and jewellery in keeping with their status and age. To a *kaniz*, Gul Banu, who had been in the service of the Emperor for fourteen years, went a set of six medium-size rubies valued at rupees fourteen thousand. Lesser gifts were given to other members of the household staff. Farrakh-Siyyar's benevolence was circumscribed by the large-scale squanderings of Jahandar Shah and Lal Kanwar. The imperial treasury and the vaults of the fort were almost empty when he took over as Emperor.

Most noblemen were at court saints, outside demons, and at homes voluptuaries. Mir Jumla, Turanian by descent and a close confidant of Farrakh-Siyyar, was no exception to this rule. When at court, in the company of other noblemen, he behaved as an angel of peace and goodwill, but outside the either Hall of Audience he breathed the fires of vengeance, and openly criticised the Persians, Afghans and the Hindus as "hardened trouble-makers whose religion is disloyalty and creed crass opportunism". A large harem, comprising the sanctioned four wives, sixty-seven mistresses and concubines without number, completed the picture of this handsome, flamboyant Amir. Farrakh-Siyyar liked him. What was more, he trusted his doubts, fears and the readings of other members of the nobility. The result was not only a surge of anti-Syeds** campaign, but also the liquidation of all those who at any time opposed Mir Jumla and his policies. Farrakh-Siyyar had no mind of his own; his likes and dislikes were chosen through the eyes of his favoured counsellors.

In March, 1713, four front-rank noblemen, including the soldier-statesman Sadullah Khan, son of the one-time Vizir of Bahadur Shah, Inayatullah Khan, were done to death by strangulation for reasons not stated at length anywhere. Presumably, they were charged with supporting Jahandar Shah in the battle against Farrakh-Siyyar. Two of them were

*Farrakh-Siyyar and Fakhr-un-Nissa had two children — son Jahan Murad Shah and daughter Badshah Begum. The former died in 1718 at the age of seven months only. Badshah Begum died in Delhi in 1789. Another son of Farrakh-Siyyar by a concubine was born at Patna in 1711. He died on 12 May 1713.

**The Turanis were orthodox Sunnis by faith, whereas the Syeds and Persians were Shiites. This religious factor gave a sharp edge to the jealousies and rivalries among the members of the two parties.

Iranian Shiites and two Afghans. It is mentioned by Khafi Khan that Padshah Begum*, daughter of Aurangzeb, had something to do with the sentence of death passed on Sadullah Khan. It is not possible even to make a reasonable conjecture as to the circumstances that led to her involvement in this case. She was at the time seventy, unwed, not very popular among the ladies of the harem, at dagger-drawn against the large group of friends and relatives of Lal Kanwar, deeply involved in charitable projects initiated in the reign of Bahadur Shah, and reportedly very unhappy at the proliferation of the good old gentlemanly vice—avarice. Sadullah Khan was seemingly an irrelevancy in her scheme of priorities. But women, in all ages and climes, have shown a kind of alacrity in hiding their thoughts and inclinations. The princess in Zeenat was less pronounced than the woman.

Four months later was executed in cold blood Subha Chand, right-hand man of Zulfiqar Khan. The charges against him were "tampering with revenue accounts, abetment of crimes against the state, and denigration of the Islamic principles of justice". First his tongue was cut out and thrown to vultures for a meal. A week later, his limbs were severed one by one and, finally, when the turn came for the head to be smashed there was no vibration of life left in him. Subha Chand had died long before the hatchet fell on his round, bald head. At the instance of Mir Jumla, Farrakh-Siyyar ordered the head to be stuffed with cowdung and then hung on a tree in front of the palace. All his properties were confiscated and all his relatives, including two sons, were thrown out of Government employment. His harem was liquidated, and the ladies put on virtual sale to junior officers. His favourite wife, Rukmini, committed suicide by setting her clothes on fire. The other six wives, all blue-blooded Rajputnis from Marwar, refused to embrace Islam, and chose instead to be repatriated to their parents' homes. The daughters, Manorma and Mayetri, were prevailed upon to enter the harem of Mir Jumla.

A favourite officer of Azim-ush-Shan when that prince wielded infinite influence at the court of Bahadur Shah was sentenced to death by hanging for his alleged part in a plot to assassinate Mir Jumla. He was Qudratullah Khan, an Afghan commander of three thousand and husband of the famed singer Nasim Akhtar of Bareilly. It is said that there was divinity in her rose complexion and magic in her voice. "When she sang the faded flowers came to life to have a look at her", wrote Khafi Khan

*Padshah Begum was the title given by Aurangzeb to his younger daughter, Zeenat-un-Nissa Begum.

in one of his expunged passages. Quratullah Khan went to the gallows with a rare show of unconcern for life. His last words were: O' Allah, let me go to death as a bridegroom goes to his bride—full of love, hope and faith". The hangman gave him a look of surprised admiration. He prayed for him when putting the noose around his neck. Qudratullah's body lay in the pit for several hours before his son, an architect of note, was permitted to take it away for burial. A thousand men turned up to accompany the Khan on his last journey. It is said that Farrakh-Siyyar was grieved at the death of "a faithful friend of my father". Perhaps he never forgave Mir Jumla for forgetting that mercy was an essential part of justice.

A year later, in January 1714, was enacted one of the most heinous crimes of the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar. For no crime committed by them, three princes who could possibly be raised to the throne were blinded—an incapacity that in Islamic law debarred them from wearing the crown imperial. The princes, in whose eyes the needle was run on 21 January, were: (1) Aziz-ud-Din, eldest son of Jahandar Shah; (2) Wala Tabar, son of Azam Shah; and (3) Humayun, Farrakh-Siyyar's own younger brother. It was generally believed that the Emperor apprehended a *coup* attempt by Qutb-ul-Mulk which, if successful, could result in any of these princes coming to the throne. A wave of disgust swept through the capital as the news of the blindings hit the public squares. Large crowds assembled in front of the fort and they "shed tears of anguish at the brutal act".

Fearing an uprising, Qutb-ul-Mulk came out with his personal body-guard, numbering over two thousand, and nipped the disturbance in the bud. It was surprising that the imperial troops were not called out for maintenance of peace. Perhaps Farrakh-Siyyar and Mir Jumla waited for the demonstration to take an anti-Syed turn before intervention. However, the crowds dispersed quietly at the appearance of Abdullah Khan's armed men. The way to the Tower was barred. There the unfortunate trio was known to be resting after the painful ordeal. No one was permitted to see them, individually or collectively, for fifteen days. On 8 February, the first to come and inquire about their state of health was Farrakh-Siyyar himself. Then came their mothers who "bewailed and prayed for nearly two hours" before returning to their apartments. Some historians assert that despite the needle, the princes could see objects around them, and were able to do their ablutions and other necessary daily work without the assistance of a maid or a servant. Food was sent to them, twice a day, from the palace kitchen. They joined their mothers on Id and other festival days. The Empire was now considered safe for Farrakh-Siyyar.

"Allah Mian", wrote Tanvir Allahabadi, "laughed at this presumption".

Two months later, in April 1714, there took place an execution that became a landmark in savagery in the history of the Mughals. Never before had a woman been executed publically in the last one hundred eighty-eight years since the conquest of Hindustan by Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Babar. On 16 April 1714, the heart of Delhi beat fast as the drum-beater announced that "Shadman Khatun, a double-tongue spy of the enemies of the benevolent, most high Emperor, will be executed today before sunset at the square midway between Lal Qila and the Dilli Gate. Come one, come all to have a look at the despatch of a demon to *Dozakh*".

The respone to this gruesome invitation was poor. A moan of disgust arose from a couple of hundred people assembled at the square when a big, burly executioner, the blade of his sword reflecting the last rays of the sun, asked the slightly-built Shadman to say her prayers and then bend the neck forward for the fatal blow. She obeyed and the next moment her headless trunk lay in dust, covered all over with what may be called a sheet of blood. The body lay where it fell for many a suspenseful hour after the sun "hid itself in shame behind the massive walls of the Shahi mosque" before it was removed for burial.

The precise nature of Shadman's guilt is not known. The popular belief was that she was caught red-handed delivering a secret note from Maharaja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur to a woman agent of Qutb-ul-Mulk. It may not be wrong to presume that this note marked the beginning of an alliance that ultimateiy led to the liquidation of Farrakh-Siyyar. Women secret agents, described by Tanvir as thorny hedgehogs, were common in Mughal harems. "They hid their evil natures behind their broad smiles and fair faces", he wrote in verse, and went on to add that the "female white snake is the most dangerous of all reptiles".

The next head to fall was that of poet Zatalli who bemoaned in verse "the decline of the Mughals who now bear the inglorious badge of lack of courage, lack of virtue, lack of chivalry and lack of all those qualities that made Babar and Akbar great". A protege of Zinat-un-Nissa Begum, Zatalli was fearless in giving expression to his feelings. When sentenced to death by the Chief Qazi, he said with defiance written large and clear in every segment of his well-cut face, "Alhamd illillah, it is better to be right than to be rich; it is better to die in defiance than to live in subservience. Where is the executioner? Nay, I will go to him. Death is my friend".

Within hours, Zatalli became a mere memory. His grave to this day is

a place of pilgrimage for the brave of heart — in fact, all those who rate spiritual freedom above material prosperity. "Some rise in subservience, others in freedom fall", he wrote a few months before his death.

Farrakh-Siyyar was slow of wit, slow of generosity, and slow of acknowledging gratitude to those who helped him seize the throne. But for the assistance given him by the Syed brothers, Hassan and Hussain, he might never have worn the robes of an Emperor, instead of consolidating his authority with the support of the Syeds, he tried, right from the beginning, to neutralise their power and influence in concert with lesser men like Mir Jumla, Khan-i-Dauran, Taqarrab Khan, and many other still lesser figures in search of royal favour. The story of the seven-year reign of Farrakh-Siyyar is a narrative of the intrigues, conspiracies and treacheries spawned by this distrust. The Emperor yearned to be truly independent, free once and for all from humiliating subservience to the will of the Syeds. The latter, on the other hand, were determined to preserve the high honour and prestige destiny had thrown into their lap. Each side claimed the reason to be on its side.

A lie, which is all lie, is easy to demolish, but a lie which is part truth is difficult to destroy. Each party looked at the other not with the eye of an honest friend, but with the mind of a deadly foe. The result was seven years of stress and strain, bluff and bluster, and also hide and seek in self-defence.

Farrakh-Siyyar's attempts to lay his hands on Qutb-ul-Mulk and his brother were foiled by the agents of the Syeds at court, in harem, at all places high and low where intriguing minds generally fashioned their plots and strategies. The Emperor found in Mir Jumla and Khan-i-Dauran men of his kidney, and neither of them was able to muster the courage needed for a knock-out blow. The Emperor's attempts to mollify Abdullah Khan after every defeat verged on the farcical. He would place his turban at the feet of the Syed, swear never to associate himself again with the Vizir's enemies, load him with prestigious presents of land and precious stones, visit his mansion for rest and recreation, invite him for entertainment in his private apartments, and do many other hypocritical capers which deceived nobody.

Qutb-ul-Mulk never slackened his defences. Wherever he went contingents of his armed bodyguard went with him. When he sat down to a meal with the Emperor, the latter took the first morsel from a dish before inviting the Vizir to partake of it. Whereas the Syed evaded many a trap laid for his capture, he never took to the offensive till he realized that to kill Farrakh-Siyyar was the only means left to save himself. In the final

move against the Emperor, the part played by Hussain Ali could not be overstressed. He possessed what is known as the killing instinct, and once the king was cornered helpless in the *zenana* of his palace, he showed no mercy and did to him what he had done to many others in complete forgetfulness of the law of retribution.

The story of the last days of Farrakh-Siyyar will be told when we come to the closing scene of his reign. Here it only needs to be stated that nearly every event of his reign was affected by the ever-thickening fumes of his intense dislike of the Syeds. The campaign against Maharaja Ajit Singh of Mewar (1710-14) was overshadowed by the Emperor's secret overtures to the Maharaja that were aimed at making sure that the supreme commander of the imperial forces, Syed Hussain Ali, did not return alive to Delhi. A letter written by Farrakh-Siyyar with his own hand was intercepted by Hussain Ali's vigilant scouts. After lauding the Rajput love of independence, the Emperor suggested:

The Syeds are not only not ignoble individuals without a drop of loyalty in their blood; their aim is to establish a new dynasty in Hindustan. Their religious fanaticism ill accords with the liberal ideas of the Mughals. It is, therefore, to our mutual advantage that they are prevented, by whatsoever means available, from achieving their objective. To that end, I suggest that you do not entertain a thought of surrender to Hussain Ali. Rather, you may take suitable steps to rid the world of the blasphemy that is Hussain Ali. We shall give you the money and materials needed for offering stiff resistance to the imperial forces. Marwar will enjoy complete independence after the liquidation of the Syeds. New territories may also be added to your kingdom. This is our solemn pledge. Together we may be able to achieve the ideals dear to our ancestors. We shall receive you in Delhi as an equal, sovereign ruler of a friendly state, after the Syed is despatched to his doom.

It was twilight, and the sun had just gone down over the waste of desert sand when the royal agent, Shaikh Minhas, presented this communication to Ajit Singh. The Maharaja turned pale as he read the contents, and he asked Minhas to prove the genuineness of his mission. The Shaikh took out the imperial seal from his pocket, and placed it before the doubting Rajput ruler. Ajit Singh examined the seal carefully for authenticity, and then returned it to the emissary. He dismissed Minhas, saying "Our reply will be given before noon tomorrow". In vain did the Shaikh search the lines on the Maharaja's brow for an indication of his mind. The

Rajput was apparently in a dilemma. He did not know whom to trust — Qutb-ul-Mulk or Farrakh-Siyyar. As has been pointed out earlier, the elder Syed had already approached him secretly for an alliance against Farrakh-Siyyar. As the lamp-lighters trouped in, Ajit Singh repaired to the adjoining tent for consultation with his commanders.

It is not known what transpired during the night. The next day, Ajit Singh surrendered to the advancing forces of Hussain Ali. He accepted *in toto* the terms of peace offered by the imperial supremo. These were: (1) his daughter to be given in marriage to Farrakh-Siyyar; (2) his son Abhey Singh, to accompany Hussain Ali to Delhi as hostage; (3) he himself to attend court when summoned, (4) unconditional return of all territories, including Ajmer, seized by him since the death of Bahadur Shah; and (5) lifting of all restrictions in Marwar on cow slaughter, sounding of the *azan*, and other Islamic practices.

This was an abject surrender, specially when it is taken into account that the imperial army, led by no less than twenty top commanders, had undergone infinite hardships in advancing towards Jodhpur from Ajmer. Scarcities of water, foodgrains and fodder were the handicaps that Hussain Ali found hard to cope with. The hungry, famished troops died in hundreds every day. The morale of the army sank to its lowest when the tribal guerillas fell on its rear and carried away whatever stocks of food and water were left. Unmindful of these tribulations, Hussain Ali did neither relent nor slow down the pace of advance. His was a gamble that brooked no hedging. On victory over Ajit Singh depended his reputation and his future at the strife-ridden court in Delhi.

Many Muslim and Rajput commanders counselled return to Ajmer for replenishment of food stocks and fresh recruitment to a depleted force, but the implacable Syed turned down all suggestions rooted in what he called "doubting hearts and brittle determinations". In the end, his will-to-win forced the Maharaja to accept the reality of greater numbers and lay down arms before Jodhpur was mauled by the long-range Mughal artillery. The letter from Farrakh-Siyyar was of little avail amidst the worsening military situation. He would rather hitch his wagon to the Syeds than risk destruction by alignment with an unpredictable, weak Emperor. The decision taken by Ajit Singh was indeed a sin in the code of Rajput conduct, but in war the line between sin and virtue is very thin. And Ajit Singh was neither a Pratap nor a Sangram Singh. He was an effete ruler of a decadent state; his main concern was to keep himself afloat in the vortex of a troubled Hindustan.

The success of Hussain Ali in Marwar was a defeat for Farrakh-Siyyar

in his undeclared war against the Syeds. The dishonest barks of a few dishonest palace watch-dogs, in particular those of Mir Jumla and Khan-i-Dauran, failed to frighten the Syeds away from their design to be the uncrowned kings of Hindustan. If anything, Farrakh-Siyyar became disillusioned with his friends, and he repeated many a time within a short period of six months the humiliating ritual of winning the Syeds to his side by whatever means his intriguing head could devise. Once he sent his mother, a Kashmiri woman of great elegance and persuasive tongue, to Qutb-ul-Mulk with instructions "to seek a pledge from him not to lend support to the enemies of the Empire". In return, she was to assure the Vizir that "my son will never do anything to harm the interests of the Syeds".

The shrewd Queen-mother used her tears and smiles and plain arguments with such studied innocence as to convince Hassan Ali of the genuine desire of Farrakh-Siyyar for peace and compromise. For a time the thoughts of revenge gave place to the thoughts of amity and common good. In accordance with a formula of accord put forth by Qutb-ul-Mulk, Mir Jumla was sent to Bihar as Governor and Hussain Ali as Viceroy to the six states of the Deccan. Hassan Ali was to retain for life the post of Prime Minister with all the traditional authority associated with that high position. Khan-i-Dauran was allowed to remain at court, but with greatly truncated powers. Farrakh-Siyyar himself vowed to be content with a little mirth and less laughter, and to leave the conduct of the affairs of state in the hands of the Syed. The so-called Inner Council was dissolved and its members sent to far-off places to occupy comparatively junior, unimportant positions.

Peace returned to the palace, but for Farrakh-Siyyar it was a peace of the grave, no more. At times, he harboured thoughts of suicide, as also of retirement in the holy city of Mecca. A letter he wrote in this distracted state to his friend and spiritual guide, Maulana Karimullah, reveals in ample measure the conflict that raged within him. After the customary salutations and inquiries about the Maulana's welfare, he poured out his heart thus:

O'revered teacher, my heart turns to charcoal when I see all around me people whom I can neither trust nor share with them my ideas about the right and wrong. They seem all hostile to me and to all that I consider good. Today, the twenty-eighth day of October, when I woke up after a disturbed night, there dwelt within me an irrepressible urge to seek company with the angel of death. None else, I felt, was willing to make

friends with me — not even my wedded wife, Fakhr-un-Nissa, for whom, as you know, sire, I cherish much love and admiration. When misfortune comes in, fellow feelings go out. I am alone, desperately alone in this wide world. Face-flatterers and sycophants are worse than backbiters and slanderers. There is no patience left in me for their dishonest words of comfort and praise. I want to put an end to this miserable life. The crown does not seem to fit my head. If unending distraction is the price of kingship, then I am not the one who want to wear the robes imperial. Let me know, O'great teacher, the course I should follow.

At times, the sacred soil of Mecca beckons me. I have no eligible heir for the throne. The All-Knowing Allah, in His wisdom, has denied me the privilege of being the father of a grown-up son. To leave the Empire for the Syeds will be a betrayal of the Amir and the heaven-residing Babar Padshah. The conflict between duty and self-esteem has laid me waste. I do not know what to do, and how best to overcome my doubts, fears and ever-thickening hatreds. Put me wiser, thou prop of my ignorance and inexperience.

Burn this letter after reading it. The secret scouts of the Syeds have long arms. Your words of advice may be sent by the hand of the bearer of this "shriek of agony". He is dependable. His loyalty is beyond question.

In sorrow did shine the part of Farrakh-Siyyar that was not open to public gaze. Perhaps what he said did not represent the real Farrakh-Siyyar. Perhaps it did. There is no ready reckoner to check on that point. However, one thing is clear. A part of Farrakh-Siyyar was in conflict with the other. It is not known what reply the Maulana sent to the Emperor. On 13 November 1714, the Emperor wrote a letter to Daud Khan, deputy to Nizam-ul-Mulk, not to relinquish charge of his post and to offer "the stiffest possible resistance to Hussain Ali in case he decides to establish his claim to the Viceroyalty of Deccan by force." Daud Khan was further promised "appropriate rewards and honours" in case he succeeded in "ridding the Empire of the profanity that is Hussain Ali". The fat was in the fire once again. Farrakh-Siyyar, the indecisive and unpredictable, broke the terms of accord. His hatred of the Syeds got the better of his intent to quit. The Syeds, he calculated, must be rubbed out of existence if the Empire was to remain the preserve of the Mughals. There could be no compromise with irreligion and duplicity, he wrote to Mir Jumla. To fall in love with hate was not given to any man. Farrakh-Siyyar was back in the fray.

Revenge is sweet — specially to monarchs who are not big enough to forgive and forget. Farrakh-Siyyar brought Luftullah Khan, alter-ego of Mir Jumla, back to favour, appointed Jaffar Khan, brother of Nizam-ul-Mulk, to the key post of Chamberlain, tightened security in the palace, dismissed many a Syed protege from sensitive positions at court and in the provinces, and waited anxiously for good news from the Deccan. Three months passed without a word from Daud Khan. As long as the headstrong Hussain Ali remained alive in possession of a large army there could be no peace of mind for Farrakh-Siyyar. The elder Syed was in comparison a damp squib, a mere bark without any threat in it. Immersed as he was deeply in sensual pleasures, his fangs could be rendered harmless with ease once Hussain Ali was out of the way.

What men call gallantry and gods adultery was very common in the Hindustan of the Mughals. Quṭb-ul-Mulk maintained a large harem in which dwelt many wives, hundreds of mistresses and concubines besides singers and dancers whose trade was pleasure and religion material gain. The stoic Hussain Ali was the real danger, not the lusty Hassan. With so many women of easy virtue around, the trap for his destruction could be laid easily. With Hussain, he was a force that could not be underrated; without Hussain, he was a sitting target for his many foes. Farrakh-Siyyar's arithmetic was not faulty. However, the plans of Fate transcend the calculations of man.

The loyal Daud Dhan obeyed the royal command. He mustered a large force and stood dauntless in the path of Hussain Ali. The latter took no note of his appeals, veiled threats, and show of armed might. Like a Bengal tiger, the Syed advanced without fear, trampling underfoot all that stood between him and Viceroyalty. Daud Khan was slain in a sharp battle near Burhanpur. A search of his personal baggage brought to light the letter Farrakh-Siyyar wrote to him three months earlier. Hussain Ali's worst fears stood substantiated. His despatch to Qutb-ul-Mulk after the incriminating discovery was revealing inasmuch as it provided a glimpse into his uncanny reading of Farrakh-Siyyar's motives:

Respected brother, let me begin with the beginning. You will recall my having warned you time and again over the last three years against putting trust in the vows and pledges of the Emperor. A liar can never change his spots. First he hob-nobbed with Ajit Singh to bring shame and ignominy to the clan of Syeds. Thereafter he used many an ignoble ploy not only to spread disaffection in our ranks but also to despatch us to the domain of death. Allah saved us, I believe, for a purpose that may unfold

itself in due time.

At the instance of Farrakh-Siyyar himself, the treacherous Daud Khan blocked my way to Aurangabad. The great God gave me victory outside Burhanpur. The battle was short but fierce. Daud Khan fell towards the end, slain by a commando when he tried to flee the field following a complete rout of his right and centre. Our victory was never in doubt. We trampled the enemy virtually underfoot. I would not have sent you a special messenger with this news alone had there not come to light a double-cross more perfidious than the devil ever attempted.

From the personal baggage of Daud Khan was recovered a secret *firman* bearing the seal of the Emperor in which he was directed in words clear and unambiguous that I should be stopped by whatever means possible from assuming charge of the Viceroyalty of Deccan. The *firman* promised rich rewards and high honours for my head. Here was a breach of the accord that should put us on our guard. The Emperor's word is never to be trusted. The security around our mansion in Delhi need to be tightened so that not even an ant could enter it without permission. I shall keep myself in readiness to return to Delhi at the first signal of trouble. We must not fall in the hands of the Emperor and his stooges. They are a bunch of crooks and vagabonds. Mir Jumla and Luftullah Khan are our chiefest enemies. Beware of them. Do not let even their shadow come near our mansion. Jaffar Khan and Khan-i-Dauran are lesser men in that they are unprincipled opportunists, ever ready to join the winning side. Nevertheless, we must not lower our defences even against them, *Khuda Hafiz*.

Farrakh-Siyyar was young, handsome, inexperienced, egoistic, deceitful, weak of mind, weak of will, and woe-begone in that his friends were no friends and his supporters Trojan Horses. The news that Daud Khan lost his life in trying to check Hussain Ali's advance shook his courage and self-confidence. He looked round in vain for advice and plans of fresh duplicity. None of his counsellors was able to suggest ways to contain the Syeds. With an unmistakable tear in his eye, he lamented that Mir Jumla was not there to guide his steps.

The brave alone stand firm in adversity. It is only the weak who rave and repent and look around for succour. Farrakh-Siyyar was an Emperor only in name. He did not possess the qualities of an effective ruler. In sheer helplessness, he wrote to Mir Jumla to return to Delhi before the Syeds raised the banner of revolt — a mistake that was to cost him not only the throne, but his head as well.

The clear-headed Qutb-ul-Mulk was not driven into hasty action at Farrakh-Siyyar's folly. He continued to attend the court as usual, but not forgetting to increase the number of bodyguard that accompanied him to the Halls of Public or Private Audience. Farrakh-Siyyar too maintained an unruffled exterior, and he did not at any time suggest by word or by action that he knew what the Vizir had come to know from his brother. This was court duplicity at its cultured best. Farrakh-Siyyar was the first to break down under the strain of studied silence. One day, he asked Qutb-ul-Mulk if the report of Hussain Ali's arrival at Aurangabad had been received. The wily Vizir bowed low, and replied with more than customary show of reverence, "God is great. The Emperor knows all, Hussain is loyal and obedient. He should have taken charge of his post by now. Not even nature has the power to subvert the orders of Your Majesty."

There was a faint smile on his swarthy face as Qutb-ul-Mulk drew back, step by a respectful step, to take his seat on the right. It did not require any exceptional power of perception to see that in his sneer there dwelt a smiling devil. Farrakh-Siyyar was not so stupid as to miss the point of Qutb-ul-Mulk's taunt. The battle was on once again. Though no trumpets were sounded, there rolled in the Hall the unseen waves of bitter hostility and distrust. The accord was dead and forgotten. What next? Both sides chose to wait and watch and woo their respective demons of deceit.

Meanwhile, in December 1715, there took place an event that each side considered advantageous to itself. Farrakh-Siyyar married, with all the pageantry of a Mughal wedding, the nineteen-year-old daughter of Maharaja Ajit Singh amidst a general belief that Marwar would hence-forth become an active friend and ally of the Empire. All arrangements for this wedding—ranging from conversion of the bride to Islam to the departure of the couple in half Rajput and half Mughal ceremonial for the royal palace—were supervised personally by Qutb-ul-Mulk—an exer-cise, apparently of selfless devotion to duty that had more to it than what met the naked eye. The Vizir was a partner of Ajit Singh in defusing Farrakh-Siyyar's plans for the demolition of Hussain Ali. The matrimo-nial alliance, in his calculation, opened up before him new areas of com-plicity with an influential segment of Rajputs for keeping Farrakh-Siyyar under his thumb. The latter, however, thought otherwise. The presence in his harem of a daughter of Ajit Singh was considered by him a guarantee against the Maharaja conspiring with the Syeds to harm his interests.

The foul world began to look handsome to either side with a comely Rajput princess holding the balance of power in her artless hands. Her primary duty was loyalty to her husband, everything else, in the code of Rajput conduct, came afterwards. She stood by Farrakh-Siyyar like a rock and, despite the unceasing courtesies extended to her by the ladies of Qutb-ul-Mulk and his brother, she remained vigilant, not letting even a word drop from her tongue that might in any way aggravate the prevailing distrusts. After some time, the frivolous Chance took control and threw into the lap of Qutb-ul-Mulk a sheaf of letters written by Farrakh-Siyyar to Ajit Singh. Opinion is divided as to the manner in which the Syed came in possession of these communications. Some historians are of the view that Ajit Singh handed over these letters to her daughter before she was escorted to Delhi from Jodhpur by Shaista Khan, maternal uncle of Farrakh-Siyyar. Apparently, she was expected to hand them over to her husband after marriage. What happened between the princess's arrival in Delhi and the fall of letters into Qutb-ul-Mulk's possession is the subject-matter of many an intelligent and unintelligent speculation. Not a few writers accuse the princess of disloyalty to her husband; others put the blame on the Vizir's secret agents in the harem; still others charge Qutb-ul-Mulk with theft while the princess was staying in Delhi before marriage at the mansion of Amir-ul-Umra. It is not easy to establish the truth in this case. Understandably, Farrakh-Siyyar suspected the Marwar princess of foul play, and she became a back-bencher in the harem before the lunar year ran out. Her attempts to explain her innocence failed to carry conviction. "Her explanations need further explaining", he told a *kaniz*, Nadira, who took courage to intercede with the Emperor on behalf of her mistress. The princess was heart-broken. She had surrendered to Farrakh-Siyyar her all on earth, and more than all in heaven. The Mughal harems were the graves of many a hope and aspiration. It is said that within six months, the fair daughter of Marwar turned gray, not with years.

The marriage festivities had hardly died down when there came the news of the capture of Banda Bahadur in Punjab. For nearly three years, the reckless Sikh leader had kept the Mughal forces at bay, spreading ruin in areas under his control and fear in territories outside his "Guru's kingdom". His plunderings of life and property were in proportion to the indignities and sufferings undergone by Sikhs at the hands of the Mughals. Like Aurangzeb, Banda was obsessed with the divine nature of his mission. He believed firmly that the tenth Guru chose him for leadership "to preserve liberty, eternal spirit of the chainless mind". His

followers credited him with supernatural powers; they were convinced that he was made not to die, much less suffer defeat, at the hands of the Mughal commanders. Banda moved from one fort to another like a phantom, defying large numbers with the flaming will to preserve independence and "to complete the work left unfinished by the True Lord Gobind Singh". His *raj* was, however, like a house built on another man's ground; it lacked the sanction either of law or of superior military power. The Mughal Emperor was determined to demolish his mansion and, to that end, he poured in reinforcements in Punjab to strengthen the hands of the Governor, Abdul Samad Khan. The Sikh surrender could be delayed, not avoided. The end came at Gurdaspur when, besieged on all sides, the garrison was forced to subsist for days on leaves, grass, bark, dead animals and even on their own flesh. Banda Bahadur was captured, along with his seven hundred forty devoted followers, on 15 December 1715.

As unconcerned with life in defeat as in victory, the Sikhs "accepted the verdict of fate with the name of the Great Guru on their tongue and the smiles of bliss on their unruffled faces". Chained heavily, Banda and his select band were brought to Delhi in iron cages on camel-backs. None of them, it is said, either asked for leniency or food and water at any stage of the long trek. They ate what was given to them, and if the food served did not conform to their taste and religious susceptibilities, they just spat at it and pushed it out of the cage. It was a brave fight against adversity; they waged it without a show of rancour or regret.

Under orders from Farrakh-Siyyar, Banda Bahadur was accorded in Delhi the same type of "honours and courtesies" as were extended to the Maharatta Shambuji in the Deccan. He was dressed like a king in robes of silk and satin, shut up in a silver cage, and carried on the back of a well-draped, majestic elephant in a procession from Akbarabad to the palace. In front were carried the heads, at the points of long bamboos, of Sikhs slain at Gurdaspur, and at the back the seven hundred forty "imperial guardsmen" in steel cages on camel-backs. The rear was brought up by the victorious commanders, Qutb-ud-Din Khan and Zakriya Khan*, on the backs of glittering horses. Banda's wife and the three-year-old son came far behind in a *palki* carried by a team of eight fettered Sikhs. This gruesome cavalcade passed through the streets of Delhi to the unceasing jeers of large crowds gathered at vantage points.

*Qutb-ud-Din Khan was the son of Amin Khan, Zakriya Khan that of Abdul Samad Khan, Governor of Punjab.

Banda Bahadur swallowed every taunt and every ignominy with a rare show of restraint and equipoise. Foreign travellers who witnessed the parade were wonder-struck at the Sikh leader's serenity in spite of grave provocations by a hostile population. Dr. William Herbert wrote in his diary: "If this is Sikh religion, then it deserves the highest praise from all those who rate spirit above matter". Banda fielded every indecent remark with a broad smile on his fearless face. Never for once did he withdraw his sharp, piercing gaze from the screaming crowds, and neither did he let his image be blemished by a look of anger. He never looked unhappy, at least outwardly, when he heard abuses hurled at him from the right and left. Instead, he raised his voice now and then to praise the Guru and to proclaim his faith in truth and right thinking.

Farrakh-Siyyar came out to have a look at "a beast in man's skin" after the procession entered the palace grounds. Flanked on either side by the Syeds and their bodyguard, the Emperor, in a poetic mood, recited a couplet from the works of Maulana Rum which observed, "How far the little wild-fire throws its light, so is seen clearly an evil deed in this beautiful world". Qutb-ul-Mulk, a scholar of Persian, nodded agreement with the king's remark, and he came out with another Rum rarity, "But for the occasional dust, dirt and dreariness this world will not look as handsome as it does". Farrakh-Siyyar looked at the Syed with the eyes of one who wanted to be and could not become a poet. "*Marhaba*, you have stolen my thought. How true!"

The Syed and the Shah spoke, as it were, in parables. An ugly sight gave them an opportunity to have a dig at one another. Farrakh-Siyyar did not come down the terrace either to have a good look or speak to Banda. He merely ordered that the "Sikh Satan" should be kept in the triple Gate torture cell till such time as he revealed the whereabouts of the hidden Sikh treasures. Thereafter, the heads of the Sikhs slain were hung on trees in the palace garden to the general joy of the cannibals of the air. The wife and son of Banda were sent for service in the household of the Deccani Begum. The seven hundred forty "loved ones" were ordered to be cut into pieces like sheep in groups of a hundred per day.

The executions began the next day in the vicinity of the Qutb Minar. They died boldly without a word of protest or lament. "They kept on chanting the name of the Guru till their tongues were pulled out or throats cut", wrote Khafi Khan. The oficial historian ended his description of the slaughter on a philosophic note, "Wheat comes from wheat, barley from barley". He apparently forgot that in the code of conduct blessed by the Prophet forgiveness ranks above revenge. God would not be God if He

were not merciful. Heartlessness is the sin cardinal.

Meanwhile, Banda was subjected to infinite tortures in his prison cell, but he gave no information with regard to the hidden Sikh wealth. In response to questions, he mustered disdainful smiles and invocations to the Guru for grant of forbearance to go through his ordeal manfully. Never did he harbour the least thought or inclination to win his freedom by submission or compromise. It did not take Farrakh-Siyyar long to realize that physical pain was powerless against persons drunk with the nectar of the spirit. In desperation, he chose to make an attempt to corrupt Banda by way of the heart. His wife and son were sent to see him in the hope that tender emotions might accomplish what brute force had failed to attain. Banda looked at them with eyes that had in them neither love nor passion; instead there shone in them a type of detachment that comes with spiritual upliftment. He spoke not a word, thus making the grim solitude of the cell grimmer and the meeting an exercise in fruitlessness. Banda beckoned them to leave as the rapidly thickening silence began to reveal the imperial design behind the visit. "Praise be to the high Guru", said Banda in a feeble voice as the two went out by the door they came in. The guardsmen were dumb-struck at the brevity of the meeting. They expected sobs, sighs and tears; instead, what they witnessed was a drama in which silence only spoke.

A report of the meeting convinced Farrakh-Siyyar that Banda would never reveal the information sought. In the circumstances to let him live was a hazard not sanctioned by any canon of justice. Orders for his execution were passed the same evening. The next day, as the cocks began to crow, Banda was awakened by a steel-faced soldier, and he was asked to enter the cage he was brought in. It was clear the Sikh leader's time was up. He obeyed with touching show of unconcern for life and all its woes. Within an hour, as the June sun rose in the west, Banda was transported to the Qutb Minar complex. What followed is a story of savage cruelty on the one-side and deathless faith on the other.

Before Banda was asked to say his last prayer, his three-year-old son was thrust into his lap with instructions to "run this dagger through him from the neck to the navel, and then make a hot drink of the blood that spurts out of the body". Banda turned pale. He had no intention to obey the order. The next moment, the heavy-weight executioner ripped open the child's belly, took out the liver, the heart and the whole lot of intestines, and thrust them in the mouth of his speechless father. The child's shrieks of pain quickly evaporated, as it were, into the thin air of Mehroli, and the team of three executioners sharpened the blades of their

weaponry for the next act. First they took out Banda's right eye with a barber's knife, then cut off with a hatchet the left foot and the two hands. There came not a moan from Banda's lips as the hackings continued limb-by-limb "till the soul of the Sikh scourge flew out to take its allotted place in a corner of hell". The parts of Banda's body were thrown out to vultures for a meal. The head was stuffed with straw and hung on a tree outside the fort. There was a Prince of Darkness in Farrakh-Siyyar's sneer when he beheld it the next day, laughed loudly, and said, "There hangs pride at its lofty perch". Banda, Tegh Bahadur and Shambuji will for ever remain testimonies to the callousness of the Mughals.

Chapter 10

TIME, THE GREAT AVENGER

WHAT cannot a real knave with a smooth tale make a stupid Emperor believe? Muhammad Murad, sixty-year-old middle-rank nobleman, put across to Farrakh-Siyyar a fake story about Banda's secret parleys with Maharaja Ajit Singh and Qutb-ul-Mulk. The trio, he held, were in alliance to topple the Emperor. "The destruction of Banda could not have come at a better time", he asserted. Some forged letters were also produced by him to substantiate the charge. He advised the Emperor to move quickly if the remaining partners in the conspiracy were to be defused and prevented from realizing their objective. He suggested that no time should be lost in summoning the Marwar ruler to Delhi and his active help sought in combating the authority and influence of the Syed. Taken in by his extravagant boastings, the Emperor presented the incriminating documentary evidence to his Rajput wife, and he asked her to seek an explanation from her father with regard to the reasons that led him to align himself against the Empire. A special emissary was sent to Jodhpur. The reply brought back by him denied the allegation; it stated:

I have had no link with the Sikhs in general, and Banda Bahadur in particular. The manner of his death saddened me, not because he was an enemy of the Mughals but because he was a man of God, seeking for his followers the right to live in peace and honour. Let me confess that my respect for him increased after he was hacked to death. To die boldly is to live for ever. The glory of Rajasthan rests on the fearlessness, in life and in death, of its rulers. Qutb-ul-Mulk is the high Vizir of the realm. My friendship with him should be taken as a guarantee of my goodwill for the Mughals, not otherwise. The treaty of peace I signed some time ago is a document of importance. I am pledged to abide by its terms for as long as I live. You may assure the Emperor of my good faith and loyalty. I

would like to stress that the letters said to have been written by me to the Sikh leader are all forgeries. The Emperor would perhaps like to hold a probe into this act of studied misrepresentation. I have often written to the Vizir in terms of amity, never in terms of a plot to overthrow the Emperor, who is also my son-in-law. The Rajput code of conduct forbids hurting one's own progeny.

Every Mughal nobleman, howsoever well-favoured, hated to be called a liar and an intriguer. Muhammad Murad, a high-spirited conversationalist who perhaps liked to hear his own loud voice, insisted on the veracity of his charges. The Emperor did not, however, pursue the matter further. He was not at the time ready to pick up a fresh quarrel with the powerful Qutb-ul-Mulk. Hussain Ali was already threatening to return to Delhi at the head of a large Mughal-cum-Marhatta army. The friends of Qutb-ul-Mulk were maintaining a strict vigil at the court. Farrakh-Siyyar was a prisoner of his own doubts and fears. The long simmering jealousies and suspicions were gradually heading towards a crisis. The supporters of Farrakh-Siyyar sat on the fence, so to say, pending settlement of a confused situation. Farrakh-Siyyar himself did not know the way to consolidation of his authority. His friends were weak, and his foes comparatively strong. The throne had never looked so fragile as it did now. The future seemed bleak and uncertain from whatever side one looked at it. The Empire was at the crossroads. The Syeds were determined not to lose what they had acquired by the dint of their arms. Farrakh-Siyyar was aware of their strength and his own weakness. He was a ruler only in name, not in practice. Every nobleman, whether at the court or in the provinces, read the character and sympathies of other noblemen through his own dread of the Syeds. Fear, not loyalty, ruled the hearts of people in high places. Considerations of self-survival bred indifference to the interests of the state. Faithfulness had no takers. The situation thus was ideally suited for adventurism of the wily and the wicked.

Muhammad Murad was a native of Kashmir. He came to some prominence when Shah Alam was Governor of the north-west in the first decade of the eighteenth century. Munim Khan liked him for his straightforward, almost blunt, manner of speech. Then he was honest and incorruptible. The advancing years taught him the benefits of deceit and double-dealing. He saw in the troubles of Farrakh-Siyyar a God-sent opportunity for self-advancement. The Emperor's mother, Sahib-i-Niswan, was too a native of Kashmir. He exploited this common link to gain

proximity to the ruler. Once he had the ears of a weak, gutless Farrakh-Siyyar, the sky was the limit to his ambition and capacity for mischief-making. Qutb-ul-Mulk was the one big hurdle in his way. To remove that obstacle was no easy task, and Murad put to use all the ingenuity of a born schemer to devise ways to deflate the Vizir. His long-standing friendly equation with the younger Syed, Hussain Ali Khan, facilitated the double-cross he launched into. Dishonesty is its own worst enemy. It was, therefore, not surprising that Murad failed to gain his material ends. In that failure lay hidden the catastrophe that in the end overtook Farrakh-Siyyar himself.

Women and wicked men are like bananas — no sooner ripe than rotten. Both are spent fast. For a while Muhammad Murad had a field day in the palace. He was with the Emperor night and noon, both partners in many types of deceit and debauchery. Farrakh-Siyyar loaded him with rare honours and rewards, raised his mansab at the rate of a thousand every full moon, allotted to him and his family members for residence magnificent mansions near the palace, gave him permission to enter the royal apartment any time of the night and day, and invited him to gala entertainments complete with every means known to man for deriving pleasure from the creations of God and nature. Evil tongues began to wag, as evil tongues must wag, at reports of these bacchanalia in pleasure-houses amidst sybaritic surroundings.

Though Qutb-ul-Mulk knew that there was no loyalty when Muhammad Murad was in the palace, yet he kept his cool and waited patiently for an opportunity to cut him to size. Though himself a libertine, Hassan Ali could at times be ruthless without being reckless, pugnacious without being narrow-minded. Qutb-ul-Mulk was at heart a noble man. The nuances of nobility did not forsake him even when it became clear that nobility was a drag, a handicap to be ignored and overcome. "The plots hatched in the fragrance of the flesh of merry maidens are mere flirtations with fancy; they need not be taken seriously for they will never see the light of day", he wrote to his brother in the Deccan. Seldom did he show concern at reports of goings-on in the palace. The reigns of Government were firmly in his hands. Farrakh-Siyyar and Murad were left alone to indulge their lusts as they wished.

Two wives placed together make cold weather. With Fakhr-un-Nissa and Ajit Singh's daughter vying for dominance in the harem, Farrakh-Siyyar was left helpless outside, not knowing either how to make friends of enemies or to make friendships more firm. His poetic enunciation that "whatever befalls in the course of nature should be considered good" was

the measure of his deep despair and misery. In a state of utter hopelessness, he sent for all those in high places who had not yet declared themselves against him. Included among them were Nizam-ul-Mulk, Governor of Gujarat, Sarbland Khan, Governor of Bihar, Itqad Khan, Maharaja Ajit Singh, and Mir Jumla*. Qutb-ul-Mulk was alarmed at this development. Once again he discontinued attending the court. The implication of this move was not lost upon Farrakh-Siyyar. The Syeds' loyalty could not be taken for granted. The brothers, Hassan and Hussain, were prepared for the worst in trying to prevent the court becoming a beehive of their enemies. Khan-i-Dauran hit the nail on the head when he told the Emperor that "even if Your Majesty drives out the Syeds with a pitchfork, they will come back in force". His were the words of sanity, knowing as he did the degree of Qutb-ul-Mulk's preparedness for a showdown and his popularity among the conservatives of the ruling junta. The Emperor, emboldened perhaps by his desperation, paid no heed to the Khan's veiled warning. For a while, he seemed determined to strengthen his hands and to oust Qutb-ul-Mulk even if that meant a civil war. He felt there was no other course left if he was to save himself the ignominy of becoming a mere stooge of the Syeds. The fat was thus in the fire. There was guarded jubilation in the palace. Perhaps the Syed era was coming to an early end.

Maharaja Ajit Singh's response was quick and positive. He reached the suburbs of Delhi with ten thousand men within a fortnight, and then began a "painful vigil" on the movement of troops in the city. Messages of welcome came to him from the Emperor as also from the Prime Minister. At the request of his daughter, Ajit Singh took upon himself the role of a conciliator. A letter he wrote to Farrakh-Siyyar reflected both his indecision and his preference for neutrality in the feud against the Syed. He said, in part:

Ten thousand Rajput troops are ready to safeguard the interests of the Empire. However, I would like to point out that civil wars are hideosities of unmatched ugliness. They ruin the victor as also the vanquished. The usefulness of conciliation on suitable terms cannot be overstressed. All men of common understanding may by courage, care, foresight and a

*In terms of accord with the Syeds, Mir Jumla was sent to Bihar in 1714. A year later he travelled to Delhi in response to a royal order. Qutb-ul-Mulk objected strongly to this violation of the agreement. Farrakh-Siyyar had to give in. Mir Jumla was asked to proceed to Lahore without stopping at Delhi. Here was yet another victory for Qutb-ul-Mulk which rankled in the Emperor's heart.

little give-and-take can make themselves gainers without undergoing the travails of blood-shedding. The Prime Minister is an experienced administrator and a man of singular stamina in pursuit of his goal. He has assured me that the welfare of the kingdom, and that alone, motivates his decisions. He is fiercely opposed to the shortsighted, opportunistic policies of power-hungry persons like Mir Jumla, Muhammad Murad and Sarbaland Khan. He regards them as the enemies of the Empire as also his own bitterest foes. In his view, they are resolved to demolish the House of the Syeds. His loyalty to Your Majesty is beyond question. He swears by the holy book that no harm will come to the Empire or to the Mughal dynasty for as long as he remains at the helm of affairs.

As an interested observer of events in Delhi and in the provinces of the Empire, I tend to agree partly with the views held by Qutb-ul-Mulk. It may perhaps be to the interest of the Empire and the dynasty of Amir Timur if ways are found to keep the Syeds on the right side of the throne. Their military power is substantial, and their influence the envy of a majority of noblemen. To antagonise them for the sake of pleasing far lesser men may neither be of short-term nor long-term advantage. My services for bringing about a lasting settlement of the long-simmering misunderstandings with the Syeds are at Your Majesty's disposal. Perhaps it would be a good beginning if I attend the court along with Qutb-ul-Mulk. I am fairly confident of being able to persuade him to resume his daily audiences in Darbar-i-Am. I shall await Your Majesty's instructions before entering into meaningful negotiations with the Vizir.

All are circumspect on hearing someone who gives unpalatable advice. Farrakh-Siyyar read and re-read every word of the Maharaja's letter, and he was convinced that the Rajput was on the side of the Syeds. Nevertheless, he twice invited Ajit Singh in most flattering words to present himself at the court alone, but to no avail. The Maharaja had apparently resolved not to do anything which might give umbrage to the Syeds. In fact, he had assured Qutb-ul-Mulk of "Rajput support in all eventualities", and he had also kept the Vizir informed of the gist of his correspondence with the Emperor. Farrakh-Siyyar took this first setback with heaviness of heart as "one of the things nature wanted", and he agreed to receive Ajit Singh for an audience along with Qutb-ul-Mulk.

Perhaps at the advice of Qutb-ul-Mulk, the Maharaja, on one pretext or the other, put off his entry into Delhi from week to week, thus leaving the Emperor guessing about his intentions. When the reports of Hussain Ali's preparations for departure to Delhi from Aurangabad reached the

capital, Farakh-Siyyar took alarm. He decided to patch up with Qutb-ul-Mulk whatever the cost in prestige and considerations of honour. To that end, he visited the Syed mansion along with his mother, wives and many other relatives known to be on friendly terms with the Minister. The latter received Farrakh-Siyyar with infinite courtesy, and in the course of an eventful day, he left nothing undone to underline his loyalty to the throne. At a meeting, following an afternoon siesta, Farrakh-Siyyar placed his bejewelled turban on the head of Qutb-ul-Mulk, saying:

The honour of the House of Timur, Babar and Akbar is in your hands. I confess unreservedly having unwittingly associated myself with intrigues aimed at ousting you from the high office of Vizir-i-Azam. My helplessness, not my will, accounted for these lapses. The past is now forgotten. I swear by the holy Prophet never again to deviate from the path of cooperation with you and your brother in bringing peace and tranquillity to this land. This pledge is given to you in the presence of the most revered Sahib-i-Niswan, my mother, who combines in her person not only love and loyalty, but also wisdom, foresight and patriotism. The daughter of Maharaja Ajit Singh is also a witness to this solemn undertaking. The Rajputs are the sword-arm of the Empire. I value greatly their support and goodwill. The blood of Maharani Jodha Bai runs in our veins. Misunderstandings may at times keep us apart, but our broad aims are similar. Passions unguided are, according to the poet-saint of Shiraz, for the most part madness. We are now resolved to make a fresh beginning, and strive our best to revive the glory of our dynasty.

This emotion-loaded plea made every eye wet. Qutb-ul-Mulk proffered the diamond-studded turban from his head, and placed it with a touching show of reverence on that of the Emperor. "This headgear fits only the occupant of the Peacock Throne", he remarked, and then proceeded to reciprocate in chaste Persian the sentiments expressed by the King. The breach, it seemed, was healed. Farrakh-Siyyar gave the Vizir a long embrace, and then burst into tears of joy and also perhaps in thankfulness at the birth of a new beginning. The ladies exchanged their *dopattas*—a traditional custom to underline amity and unity.

When the time came for the royal party to leave, Qutb-ul-Mulk presented to the Emperor gifts worth a million rupees. Farrakh-Siyyar accepted only a gold plaque which Alamgir gave him for bravery in the Deccan, and the rest — four traysful of dazzling workmanship in gold, silver and precious stones of divine purity—were put on display for a

while, and then returned to the Vizir with the blessings of the high priest. Qutb-ul-Mulk's twelve contingents of gallant bodyguard escorted Farrakh-Siyyar to the palace. The city of Delhi hummed with expectations of oneness that promised a new era. Farrakh-Siyyar was in his element after the sun hid itself behind the ramparts of the castle. He summoned all the court musicians and all the dancing girls known far and wide for their skills in portrayal in soft steps of the whole gamut of human lusts and longings, and he commanded them to put up a show "the angels, the archangels and their winged spouses would delight to set their eyes on".

Let Farrakh-Siyyar be praised for the manner in which he recited verses after verses from the Persian classics to underline the virtues of unity, friendship and peace. At his lyrical best, he at times kept rhythm in words elegant and mellow with the sounds of the dancers' bells. His example was followed by the elite gathering. Even the sedate Qutb-ul-Mulk was seen to keep tune with the merry notes by humming soulfully the famous stanzas of famous songs. The choicest Persian wines kept the evening float by in a haze of all-round happiness. When one of the fair singers struck melodiously the words of a deathless Saadi invocation to the lord — "our pledges are seals of faith and fearless obedience to thy will" — the Emperor stood up, bowed his head and, according to Yahya Khan, tears of thankfulness rolled down his cheeks. The spontaneous shouts of *Marhaba, marhaba, subhan Allah* filled the hall till Farrakh-Siyyar, afloat, as it were, on waves of fresh hopes, beckoned to the sprightly singer to come nearer. She obeyed with the elegance of movement that charmed no less than it beguiled an enthralled audience, and stood a picture of artless reverence a couple of yards from the throne. The Emperor moved forward, and slipped around her shapely neck an all-pearl necklace that he himself was wearing. She bowed and bowed and bowed in touching gratefulness till the Emperor bade her retire with a smile that revealed in no uncertain way his appreciation of her art. There was no more singing, dancing and merry-making. The best had come and gone.

Before repairing to his apartment, Farrakh-Siyyar embraced Qutb-ul-Mulk, repeating within the hearing of noblemen around yet another Saadi gem — "honesty is joy, and truthfulness never bereft of happiness". This was the real Farrakh-Siyyar, good-natured, good-hearted and well-read. Indecision was not his trade, only a compulsion of circumstances. In more propitious times, he might have made a better king, a better man. The emergence of the Syeds as a military power stronger than that of the king was a factor that dwarfed his personality, sapped his initiatives, and

made him look like a shadow of the greatness of his ancestors. In his youth, he was a high-spirited conversationalist who would rather speak ill of himself than not to speak of himself at all. He wanted that all men were like himself, communicative, full of zest for life, open-hearted, blessed with a sense of humour, artless, frank and faithful to family traditions. The death of Azim-ush-Shan and the war he was led to wage against his uncle, Jahandar Shah, resulted in a dramatic change of his personality. The rise of the Syeds made matters worse. A gay, gallant prince turned into a bundle of distrusts, fears, indecisions and faithlessness. This was a new Farrakh-Siyyar—vindictive, unpredictable and one who swore revenge and thus kept his own wounds green.

Qutb-ul-Mulk had reason to be pleased with the events of the last twenty-four hours. His supporters gathered around him in ever larger numbers, and his foes virtually vanished in the rat-holes of dismay and fear. Even Muhammad Amin Khan, a cousin of Nizam-ul-Mulk and a known adversary of the Syeds, travelled to Delhi from Malwa* only to align himself behind Qutb-ul-Mulk. Sarbland Khan also changed sides, not openly but in thought and intent following the Emperor's veiled refusal to raise him to the office of Prime Minister. Once an admirer and ardent supporter of Farrakh-Siyyar, Jaffar Khan, brother of Nizam-ul-Mulk, also shut his doors against the king who, it was generally believed, had reached an accord with Qutb-ul-Mulk not from strength but from a woeful lack of confidence in his friends as also in his arms. The wily Raja Rattan Chand, revenue minister, in whose head spawned all the intrigues aimed at change in the occupancy of the throne, told his patron that a great empire and fragile loyalties went ill together, a formulation meant to underline that the days of the Mughals were numbered and that the rise of the Syed sun was an inevitability no man could check.

The one-time money-lender and a petty shopkeeper, Rattan Chand worked his way up at the court through unashamed knavery and double-dealing. Qutb-ul-Mulk came to trust him because of his part in once saving his life on the battlefield. Abdullah Khan never forgot the good turn, and in gratitude loaded him with rewards and honours disproportionate to his abilities as a high level pragmatic financier. At best, Rattan Chand was an evil genius, at worst a master of chicanery, collusion and corrupt practices. A symbol of the tottering, decadent Empire, he did everything possible to widen the breach between the Emperor and the

*Muhammad Amin Khan had been a permanent Governor of Malwa since 1712. He derived his influence at the court mainly through his wife, Zinat Mehr, a relative of Aurangzeb's first wife, Dilraz Begum.

Prime Minister. He was unfaithful to himself, unfaithful to the Emperor and, in the ultimate analysis, unfaithful to Qutb-ul-Mulk. It was, therefore, in the fitness of the law of nature that he fell by unfaithfulness.

The new accord was a product of necessity, not of a genuine desire on either side to forge a common front against self-seeking saboteurs. Muhammad Murad and Mir Jumla would have been no more than drums with holes in them had the rift at the top been healed. They bent over backwards, therefore, to stoke the Emperor's ego and thus to keep burning the fires of mutual acrimony. For a short while, the pledges given and received were honoured by the two factions, but there lay inbuilt in them the pressures of self-interest that could not but lead to an explosion at the slightest provocation. It did not take long for an incitement to rear its hideous head, and thus to underscore the uselessness of accords reached to serve the hour. A clash in the streets of Delhi between the troops of Maharaja Ajit Singh and the chief of the royal artillery very nearly developed into a mini-civil outbreak of hostilities had it not been for the moderating role of a section of the Muslim nobility who saw in the conflict a studied design to defame the Syeds and dethrone Farrakh-Siyyar. The all-day carnage ended late in the evening when the Emperor, accompanied by his Rajput wife, appeared on the scene at the head of a fairly large force and commanded ceasefire "without delay, without conditions". For once Farrakh-Siyyar was firm and courageous, and the result emboldened him to play the king with a stout heart. When a man comes to know he is brave, the devil drills that awareness into him a hundred times. Farrakh-Siyyar quelled the riot, and paved the way for his own destruction. Qutb-ul-Mulk became increasingly wary of the palace junta, and he sent urgent messages to Hussain Ali for immediate return to Delhi. The ever-watchful younger Syed was not surprised by this call. Already he had made arrangements with "the enemies of the Mughals" to mount a full-scale assault on the north, corner Farrakh-Siyyar into surrender, and to place on the throne someone "less intriguing, less egoistic, less prudish".

To give legitimacy to his armed strength, Hussain Ali, a political tactician of infinite guile, announced the presence in his entourage of "prince Muin-ud-Din, son of prince Muhammad Akbar whom destiny forced to flee to Persia in the reign of his father, Aurangzeb Padshah, Alamgir". It was further clarified that "this legitimate claimant to the throne of Delhi" was handed over with due ceremony to the Mughal representative in Deccan by the Maharatta chief, Raja Sahu*. Hussain

*In fact, the child was not a son of prince Akbar. He was the second child of the Qazi of a town in Konkan, and his birth was kept a close secret in the plot to embarrass Farrakh-Siyyar.

Ali conferred on the child all the honours of a royal prince, made arrangements for his travel to Delhi in the customary Mughal style. Strict precautions were taken for his safety on the way. The red tent was pitched for him at halting stages amidst the most pleasant surroundings. Kettle-drums were sounded at the time of his departure from one stage to another. A team of tasters sampled the fifty dishes of food served to him. Twenty-one experienced nurses looked after his physical needs night and day. The gold-and-silver palanquin in which he travelled was guarded by a contingent of Aahidis handpicked for their loyalty and trustworthiness. The twenty-one top commanders in charge of the twenty-five thousand men and ten thousand horse which comprised the expeditionary force did the usual homage to the prince before the afternoon prayers every Friday. Gifts and *nazranas* were presented to him on festive days. In fact, Hussain Ali left nothing undone to proclaim in words and in deeds that Farrakh-Siyyar was a pretender and that the crown imperial would soon adorn the head of Muin-ud-Din.

The reports of the honours extended in public to "the grandson of Alamgir Padshah" caused alarm in Delhi. Farrakh-Siyyar discussed the matter with his friends, and they all advised against any hasty move to establish the illegitimacy of the child's right to the throne. Raja Jai Singh was the only one to think otherwise. "The lie must be nailed at the earliest, if need be by the sword", he counselled. To speak the truth as one sees it, specially in adverse circumstances, is much the most praiseworthy. At first, Farrakh-Siyyar tended to agree with the Raja but, being a born coward, his courage caved in when the time came for taking a decision. Instead, he made yet another attempt to placate Qutb-ul-Mulk by an ignoble show of feigned friendship complete with promises and pledges on the holy book, presentation of gifts, exchange of turbans, sobs and sighs and tears shed by Sahib-i-Niswan and other ladies, and joint prayers for lasting amity and goodwill. Similar exercises in pursuit of peace had been gone through many times before. Each side knew that the oaths were hollow and pledges meaningless. Yet the latest drill was enacted in the hope that man could forget as well as forgive. The fundamentals of human character were against them. Only courts of law may forgive, not the man born of a woman. To forget is the greater impossibility. The angels may perhaps be able to erase something from their memories, but this facility is denied to those who live by the beatings of the heart.

Both Farrakh-Siyyar and Qutb-ul-Mulk waited for the arrival of Hussain Ali, but for different reasons. Fear animated the Emperor,

vengeance the high Vizir. The air was thick with rumours and forecasts of the doom. Raja Jai Singh was perhaps the only high-ranking courtier to maintain his cool and watch the slowly unfolding developments with a degree of indefinable optimism. Money-power and dynastic prestige were on his side. An entertainment he held at his mansion for the Emperor and the Prime Minister was, in the words of Yahya Khan, "a feast for gods and goddesses and their resplendent retinues in a garden of the paradise". Various types of fruit from Persia, Samarkand, Balakh, Bokhara and Kabul were hung on artificial trees lit by thousands of coloured lights arranged in a manner to create the illusion of a ship afloat on the rays of the moon. The guests were wonder-struck at this rare display of the art of illumination. The Raja presented to the Emperor gifts valued at a million rupees and to the Vizir a set of jewellery dating back to the dawn of Rajput glory. Jai Singh's aim was to create an atmosphere in which their might arise hate for hate, scorn for scorn and love for love. The success he achieved was only partial. Within the redstone walls of the mansion, there reigned for a while friendship, peace, joy and camaraderie; the forbidding realities of hate, jealousy and mistrust took control as soon as the trumpets sounded to proclaim the departure of the Padshah Salamat.

The Raja was disappointed, not dismayed. He continued his efforts to forestall the clash of loyalty and hate. That he did not succeed was a measure of the intensity of antagonism between the rival factions. He was circumspect in dealing with Qutb-ul-Mulk, and he made use of double-circumspection in his approaches to the Emperor. The latter was the king without power, hence less reliable. The Minister held all the authority in his hands without the insignia of royalty; hence comparatively blunt and straightforward. Qutb-ul-Mulk had enough reason to look at Jai Singh with one suspicious and one admiring eye. The part the Raja played in breaking the resistance of the Jat chief Chamaran against the imperial army* was a memory that still embittered his relationship with the Rajput commander. Jai Singh, who openly equated truth with faithfulness, consistently refused to throw in his weight on the side of the Syeds. He was perhaps Farrakh-Siyyar's staunchest friend at the court.

*The Jat Chief, Chamaran, fought on the side of Bahadur Shah in the 1707 war of succession. He gained considerable strength in the next ten years. His unceasing pillaging of the Mughal territories between Delhi and Agra led Farrakh-Siyyar in 1718 to assign to Raja Jai Singh the task of putting down what came to be known as the Jat insurrection. With a view to weaken Farrakh-Siyyar's authority, Qutb-ul-Mulk secretly lent his support to Chamaran by way of keeping him well supplied with arms and foodgrains. Jai Singh complained to the Emperor. The latter expressed his helplessness to take action against the Vizir.

It was in October, 1718, that Hussain Ali left Aurangabad at the head of a massive army comprising thirty thousand Mughals and half as many Maharatta troops. At the head of the Maharatta contingents was no other than the Peshwa, Balaji Vishwanath, a diplomat-soldier of considerable experience and renown. The release of Raja Sahu's wife and son, prisoners in Delhi for the last nine years, was a condition of Maharatta support to Hussain Ali. The Maharattas had also been promised complete sovereignty in Deccan in case of victory against Farrakh-Siyyar. The Maharatta mercenaries who volunteered to join the expedition were paid at the rate of rupee one a day — a salary much higher than that drawn by the imperial troops. The pace set by Hussain Ali was fairly fast, covering nearly thirty miles a day on a terrain that did not lend itself to speed either by man or horse. The reports from Delhi were disquieting inasmuch as they told of plots to capture Qutb-ul-Mulk, plots to oust him from the high office, as also of plots to get him murdered by hired gangsters. A despatch spelt out in detail the parts of a conspiracy to poison the Syed to death with the help of an old-time cook and a maid of over twenty years' service in the Minister's household. Fifty thousand rupees had been paid in advance to each of these agents of the conspirators with a promise of equal amounts after the body of the Syed was consigned to dust. The plot was foiled by the sharp eyes of a kitchen attendant who happened to see the chef scatter sparsely on the main dish of calf's meat a chilly-coloured powder in a manner that could not but arouse suspicion. The dish was fed to a dog who died instantly. The report did not reveal the fate that befell the conspirators, but it did urge Hussain Ali to quicken his pace and reach Delhi before the imperial inner junta took to the sword in sheer desperation.

The progress of Hussain Ali's march northwards was reported to Farrakh-Siyyar by teams of imperial scouts sent out for the purpose. Panic gripped the palace, the court and the city as the thick-coming rumours magnified out of all proportion to reality the size, spread and self-confidence of what came to be called the Syed brigades of invasion. Farrakh-Siyyar, fickle and faint-hearted, found himself out of depth in the daily-deepening crisis. He called a meeting of his supporters to chalk out ways to meet the danger. Except Jai Singh, they all voiced agreement with the Emperor that diplomacy, not daredevilry, held the key to their success. Pronouncing courage to be more potent than wisdom, the Raja counselled counter-aggression, and he offered to raise an army of fifty thousand Rajputs to meet the challenge. He made a strong, eloquent plea in support of his argument, but the Emperor responded only with reciting

couplets from the works of Amir Khusrau and Shaikh Sa'adi in praise of amity and understanding. Jai Singh ended on an angry note, saying "amity yes, surrender no". The assembly ended without reaching a decision. The Rajput chief's parting submission that "it is the beautiful bird that gets caged" was perhaps his mode of saying that words, howsoever beautiful, could not win wars.

In a bid to wrest the initiative from the hands of Hussain Ali, the perplexed Emperor chose to send the broad-shouldered general Ikhlas Khan as his special peace-maker to Hussain Ali. A man of fine words, fine disposition and fine perceptions of the right and wrong, Ikhlas Khan met Hussain Ali at Mandu, and did whatever he could to persuade him to return to his post. In a thoughtful bid to clinch the argument, he handed over to the Syed a carefully-worded royal order and also a summary of what he had put across verbally in defence of the royal wish. The reiteration of his brief in writing was as forceful as it bore the appearance of cogency. He said, in part:

To enlarge or expand on what I have already stated is beyond my powers of reasoning; it is also beyond the facility of expression I am capable of. Therefore, I am resorting to the pen to strengthen what my tongue might have erred in conveying. The basic point I tried to make over and over again was that the Emperor was a man of peace, goodwill towards all and enmity for none. He holds you and your brother in the highest esteem. He remembers with gratefulness the part you played in securing for him the throne of Hindustan. He also acknowledges with much appreciation your role in bringing stability to a realm at one time torn with court jealousies and dissensions. He has entrusted to the hands of you two the most important posts in the Empire. In fact, the future of the Empire and the Mughals is in your hands. You are the guardians of his throne and his honour. Betray him not because of the misunderstandings created by small men for small gains. On more than one occasion he has assured Qutb-ul-Mulk of his complete trust and faith in his loyalty.

Your recourse to show of force in alliance with the bitterest enemies of the Empire is a development that intrigues the Emperor. If your brother wants the throne, let him come, and get it. The Emperor is prepared to abdicate in his favour, and spend the rest of his days in Mecca. But for heaven's sake, do not lend yourselves to be the agents of infidels. The evil deeds of the accursed Shivaji and his equally infamous son, Shambuji, compelled the great Alamgir Padshah to wage a crusade against the

Maharattas for over twenty-five years. Are you going to undo his life-work and hand over the Empire to the soulless Sahu on a platter? Once the Maharattas are in Delhi, they will never leave that city without becoming its masters. Allah will never forgive you for this stab in the backs of Timur, Babar, Akbar and Aurangzeb. I beg of you to think of the consequences of what you are planning to do. Islam cries aloud that you return to your post without making any commitment to its enemies. What is worth in any campaign but that it will bring so much fame and lustre to the banners of Islam. Oaths are only words, and words only wind. Trust not a pledge the progeny of Shivaji makes. This was the advice given by the king of kings, Aurangzeb, on his death-bed. Deceit has power above the stars and fate to destroy dynasties. It will be an act of thoughtless suicide to let Balaji Vishwanath enter Delhi at the head of twenty thousand fanatic Maharattas. Think of your plan again. The stakes are too high to be played without taking into account all aspects of the possible consequences. I have nothing more to add. May the great Lord guide you to take the right decision.

This was a thought-provoking note, well-worded and well-argued. Hussain Ali read and re-read it in the solitude of his tent. There was enough reason in it to merit rethinking. He also read once again the despatches from his brother in Delhi. To retrace his steps to Aurangabad, he reckoned, would be to unhand the head of the family in what looked like a gathering storm, and to continue the march to Delhi, he feared, might go down in history as an act of grave offence to Allah. For three days, he pondered over the pros and cons of the dilemma he was confronted with. In the end he chose to assuage his troubled conscience by an affirmation that he knew his plan was a lie to God, lie to himself and a lie to the throne he was pledged to serve. He told Ikhlas Khan that there were some urgent matters to be discussed personally with the Emperor, and that he intended to return to his post within less than a month. He swore loyalty to the throne, and denied in no uncertain words any plan to oust the Emperor with the help of the Maharattas. "Balaji Vishwanath is an adviser, not a military ally", he asserted with eyes turned skyward and the right hand placed firmly on that part of the chest under which throbs the human heart. Ikhlas Khan feigned happiness at that assurance, and suggested that in that case it would only be right if the Maharatta troops were disbanded and sent back to their homes in the Deccan. The Syed said he would consider the suggestion in consulation

with the Peshwa. The imperial envoy was then permitted to return to Delhi. The march northward was resumed the next day. The Maharatta brigades remained where they were — in the van under the command of Balaji Vishwanath. The Ikhlas mission had to all purposes failed. The Syed made no change in his plans. Qutb-ul-Mulk was to be rescued first, the fears expressed by Ikhlas Khan could be considered later.

The mounting agitation in Delhi developed into alarm as the forces of Hussain Ali neared the city. At every stage, the uncompromising Syed was met by high-level envoys from the court, pleading for "consideration and understanding", but to no avail. In a desperate bid to halt escalation of the fear psychosis into a war hysteria, Farrakh-Siyyar chose to eat yet another humble pie by calling on Maharaja Ajit Singh at the latter's camp just outside Delhi. What transpired at their meeting is not known. Perhaps it may not be wrong to presume that the Emperor's suggestion, in the name of family ties, for an approach to Qutb-ul-Mulk to save peace even at that last stage was found impracticable as the Vizir had already left his mansion to extend welcome to his brother. The crisis had reached the point beyond all remedy. The only way open to Farrakh-Siyyar, it seemed, was to gather whatever courage was left in his chest of mud, and to act on Jai Singh's advice to meet force by force notwithstanding the risk involved. But the gutless Emperor could not muster what nature had not endowed him with. His heart was bloodless, his face yellow with extreme nervousness.

Though the enemy was knocking at the gates of the capital, Farrakh-Siyyar continued to hope that bestowal of high honours and titles could turn foes into friends. The *mansabs* of the Syeds were raised to eight thousand each, all their jagirs were made hereditary, their friends and relatives were promoted to high positions, traysful of jewels, pearls, rubies, diamonds and sapphires were sent to their senior ladies, their adversaries at court and in the palace were either sacked or transferred to remote places—in fact, the Emperor conceded every demand which had at any time been put forward by the two brothers. Here was the surest way the Emperor could follow for self-destruction. The Syeds appeared to have won before the fort guns went into action. The Mughal prestige had never before sunk so low. Farrakh-Siyyar reduced himself virtually to the position of a beggar at the door of the Syeds. His reign ended before his death. The Syeds became the *de facto* rulers of a dying empire. The heart of Delhi beat slower and slower as the not-too-distant winds of change became clearly audible. The population took to prayers night and day; it waited for the next act in fright and terror.

He is truly miserable who does not die before he wishes to die. Farrakh-Siyyar was in that unenviable position as Hussain Ali's army pitched its tents four miles outside Delhi. On 19 February 1719, Qutb-ul-Mulk, accompanied by Maharaja Ajit Singh and his principal adviser, Raja Rattan Chand, went there to prepare plans for future action. It is generally believed that it was at this meeting that a decision was reached to replace Farrakh-Siyyar by one of the many princes residing in Delhi. At the advice of the worldly-wise Rattan Chand, the plan to place Muin-ud-Din on the throne was finally dropped. The ambiguity of his credentials, he stressed, might turn out to be a handicap more forbidding than they could contend with. Already there floated about rumours in circles high and low that Muin-ud-Din was a commoner with no royal blood in his veins, and that his accession would turn out to be the beginning of yet another war of succession. Rattan Chand produced a document, sent to him by one of his agents in Goa, stating clearly that Muhammad Akbar left behind no child when he boarded a Portuguese ship for Persia. Hussain Ali was no doubt aware of this reality. All the noise he made about Muin-ud-Din was a mere ploy to secure Maharatta support for the ouster of Farrakh-Siyyar.

Balaji Vishwanath was also called to take part in the deliberations. He expressed no preference in the choice of a candidate. His purpose was different. His sights were set much higher than a mere change in the occupancy of the throne. It was not surprising that he gave the Syeds a free hand in dealing with Farrakh-Siyyar as they thought best. He waited for the inevitable turmoil; the Maharatta brigades could be depended upon to do the rest. "It is good to have fought and won, but it is infinitely better to win without fighting", he wrote in a despatch to Raja Sahu. Balaji had not come to Delhi to watch the ceremonial of one Mughal prince succeeding another.

According to Yahya Khan, Farrakh-Siyyar's "liver melted" when he came to know about this four-corner meeting. "O'Lord, what fool it was that first invented loyalty", he exclaimed when Nizam-ul-Mulk, wearing the full robes of his rank, came in to secure the Emperor's approval for an audience after mid-day prayers on 23 February with the Syed brothers and Maharaja Ajit Singh. A joint request for "presenting to the Padshah our assurances of loyal service" was received a few hours earlier. Farrakh-Siyyar had no alternative but to grant the request with "pleasure and with full faith in the integrity and obedience of those whom I consider as the three pillars of the Empire". The hour of the audience was fixed at "three hours after the sun is at its highest point in the sky"—a concession

to astrologer Mahmud Ali Khan who, according to Khafi Khan, read in that point of time "a near-confluence of the seven heavenly bodies that govern the destiny of the Empire". In pursuance of a condition laid down by Hussain Ali, all security arrangements in and outside the fort were to be supervised by his own troops. In consequence, all imperial guards were replaced by Maharatta troops on 22 February, gates of the fort closed to unauthorised persons, and armed men bearing the insignia of the House of Shivaji, placed at entrances to the royal apartments and the Halls of Public and Private Audience.

As the day of the audience dawned, bright and cool, it became as clear as a whistle that the gods were preparing to write a new chapter of Indian history. Farrakh-Siyyar, an optimist with dwindling hope, stuck to the traditional Mughal pageantry when he left for Diwan-i-Khas flanked on either side by immaculately dressed bands of bodyguard on horses drunk, as it were, with the pride of their pedigree. High-ranking courtiers, none below the rank of five thousand, received him at the main royal entrance, and they escorted him with the usual fanfare of lofty phrases to the Peacock Throne. Hardly had the Emperor settled down on his multi-million rupee seat when there came the announcement that the "three noble men seeking to kiss the threshold of obedience" were waiting to be admitted to the royal presence. A picture of unperturbed graciousness, the Emperor gave his assent with half a smile and signalled the bearded Chamberlain with a slightly raised right hand that the dignitaries be ushered in with due courtesies and honours. A thick hush came upon the audience as the two Syeds, in their robes of silk, walked in side by side, and bowed their heads in obeisance seven feet from the throne.

In a rare gesture of goodwill, Farrakh-Siyyar came down the high seat, and he first held Qutb-ul-Mulk and then Hussain Ali in light embrace. After inviting them to take their seats on the right of the throne, he beckoned to the Chamberlain again that the Maharaja be ushered in the manner specified in the treaty of friendship. Ajit Singh walked in, wearing on his turban the insignia of Rajput royalty, and he made no show of subservience to the Mughal Emperor except making the ritualistic salute when Farrakh-Siyyar gave him a gentle smile of welcome. The Emperor then spoke a few words of "mutual friendship" to which the Maharaja replied with an equal show of cordiality. The Deputy Chamberlain, Muhammad Mustafa Kamal, then escorted the Rajput chief to his seat on the left of the throne.

Following a short pause, the visiting dignitary, Hussain Ali, rose to make his presents to the Emperor. His *nazrana* comprised a hundred gold

coins and an equal number of silver rupees. In return, the Emperor girded him with a bejewelled dagger, and invoked on him the blessings of Allah in the discharge of his duties as Commander-in-Chief. Here ended the long-awaited public ceremonial of the audience. The Shaikh-ul-Islam, Haji Muhammad Yusuf, then recited loud and clear an *ayat* from the Quran invoking peace and prosperity on the faithful. This was the traditional way of asking the assembled nobility to leave. The Emperor, accompanied by the Syed brothers and Maharaja Ajit Singh, then repaired to the mini-throne room for what the court historian called "discussion on important affairs of the state".

"Oh, happy years", Farrakh-Siyyar was heard to say to himself, "who would not be a prince loved by his parents and admired by those charged to serve him?" It was apparent the strain of long-suppressed feelings of hostility was beginning to wear out his patience. To feign friendship amidst intense mutual distrust went ill together with the Emperor's youth and his known dislike for discord. The circumstances had forced on him a role that went against his grain. Once, in sheer disgust, he told Muhammad Mardan,"Here all are noble, save the nobility"—a declaration of profound dismay at what was going on at all levels of the court. He seemed to be aware that the extreme religious and political enunciations formulated by his great grandfather, Aurangzeb, could not but augment old dissensions and create new ones. And the tragedy of this awareness was that Farrakh-Siyyar himself knew of his own limitations. He had come to the throne not by the dint of his own courage and armed strength, but by the help of those who were now ranged against him. Wrapped perhaps in the thoughts of his vulnerability and helplessness, he led the Syeds and the Raja to the room where in the days gone by many a decision of far-reaching importance had been taken. It may perhaps be no exaggeration to say that there lay daggers hidden in the smiles on all four faces. No other person was present at this meeting, none of the four carried any weaponry with him.

Farrakh-Siyyar set the ball rolling by asking Hussain Ali, "Where is prince Muin-ud-Din? I have been waiting to make his acquaintance. He should be free to roam about in this city of his ancestors. High honours await him at the court. Some scholars in Islamic law seem to think that the throne belongs to him by the right of succession. I shall be glad to abdicate in his favour if the ulema ask me to do so after taking into consideration all aspects of his claim".

Hussain Ali pondered for a while how best to answer this rather embarrassing question. Preferring to evade the issue for the time, he gave

an extra voltage to the smile on his fearsome face, and said, "The prince is resting after a long journey. He is not under my charge. Raja Sahu entrusted him to the care of the Peshwa. I am told Balaji Vishwanath will present him for an audience only after the mother and brother of the Maharatta chief are released from prison".

Farrakh-Siyyar understood the implication of this remark. Muin-ud-Din was no more than a ploy in the hands of the Maharattas to gain maximum concessions from the Emperor. The extension to him of royal honours and privileges by the Syeds was a compulsive necessity, not an acceptance of his claim to the crown. Farrakh-Siyyar did not press the matter further. The time was on his side. Qutb-ul-Mulk shed the pretence of loyal devotion, and he asked Farrakh-Siyyar many questions which were as embarrassing as they were straightforward: "Where was the necessity of writing to Daud Khan to kill my brother. . .?" "What impelled you to encourage the Marwar Rajputs to put up stubborn resistance against Hussain Ali's forces?" "Why did you conspire with Muhammad Murad to get me killed at the Idgah?" "What were the circumstances that led you to give all important posts in the palace to officials known to be hostile to the house of the Syeds?" "Why was Jai Singh detailed to raise a large army, much bigger than the circumstances warranted, to suppress a minor revolt by the Jats?" . . . and so on. To these and many other direct charges levelled against him, the Emperor gave the stock reply: "Perhaps you will do well not to ask me to explain forgeries, irresponsible talk and rumours without any basis in fact". Farrakh-Siyyar denied with a degree of unusual firmness any knowledge of the accusations levelled against him. As was his wont, he swore by the Prophet and also by the values held sacred in Islam to affirm time and again that in his heart there was nothing but respect and friendship for the Syeds. "I am not an ingrate", he declared amidst tears, and he went on to narrate one by one the honours and rewards he had bestowed upon "my benefactors" in the last seven years. He spoke with such high emotion and seeming honesty as left the doubting trio no alternative but to change the course of discussion to comparatively minor administrative matters.

Finding himself on firmer ground, Farrakh-Siyyar reduced the emotional content of his voice and speaking in a lower key, he went on to explain and justify his decisions on grounds of expediency. Not satisfied either with the Emperor's reasons or his interpretations, Qutb-ul-Mulk demanded, in the right of his office, that in future no posting of persons in the rank of two thousand and above should be made without his written approval. He also demanded that all high posts, in the provinces and at the court,

entrusted to "persons of doubtful loyalty and efficiency" should be reviewed immediately in consultation with him. Notwithstanding the threat implicit in these demands, the Emperor did not consent into relinquishing his authority, and replied thus:

Ah ! Sole supporter of my throne and honour, what you demand is more than what the gods threw into my lap at Khajua. To me, kingship is a trust bestowed on me by the Almighty Allah. To divest myself of the authority accruing from that divine dispensation will be a denial of His will, nay, of His very existence. From the time of Babar Padshah, the Mughal emperors have held power in His name and on His behalf. The demand you have formulated is in essence a demand for my abdication. You will perhaps understand that under our law and our tradition I cannot be a willing partner to the foul profanation that has been suggested. To act on your advice is one thing, to obey you another. I am the king. The throne of Alamgir did not come to me that I should abuse its sanctity. You are the Vizir, the chief counsellor. To adduce to yourself the rights of the king, I hold, is an act of disobedience to God. Perhaps you three today possess the armed strength to change the course of history. Death is a fearful thing, and a life of dishonour more fearful than death.

Having said this, I still declare myself to be your friend. But, listen, the friendship of God is of greater value to me. I have nothing more to say. I entrust myself to the care of the most benevolent Creator who is also the merciless Destroyer. I shall be glad to receive you in audience whenever you request for one. I am tired. The prayer-time is also near. Insha Allah, we shall meet again. May God give you the wisdom to accept and live by what is right. Untruth is the other side of infidelity.

Having placed all his cards on the table with a show of frankness that surprised the Syed brothers, Farrakh-Siyyar walked out to his apartment. He was not in a rage, but in a mood of utter humility and submission to God. Fakhr-un-Nissa divined, however, the agitation of her husband's mind and she used every ploy known to woman to restore his calm. The Emperor insisted on being left alone for the remaining part of the day. Here was a lonesome climax to a drama that began nearly two hours earlier amidst traditional Mughal pageantry in the hallowed Hall of Public Audience. The writing on the wall was clear. The reign of Farrakh-Siyyar was near its end.

It is good to have the powers and privileges of a despot, but it may not always be good to use these powers like a despot. Farrakh-Siyyar was in

a quandary. He had virtually thrown a challenge to the Syeds, but he lacked the armed might to score a victory against them. He had flaunted his divine right to rule, but divinity is almost invariably on the side of the big battalion. In his confusion, he sent secret requests for help to Raja Jai Singh. A letter was also sent to Maharaja Ajit Singh by his daughter, requesting her father to restrain the Syeds from any extreme step. The bearer of this note was a Rajput maid-servant, Rajni, known rather for her wits than looks. A double-spy, she kept the Syeds informed of what was happening in the royal harem, and also fed the Emperor and his wife with "stories of plottings in the enemy camp". Her husband, Jabbar Singh, was a headman in the household of Raja Ajit Singh. She delivered the note to the Marwar ruler, and also apprised Qutb-ul-Mulk, in all probability through her husband, of her secret mission. Ajit Singh told Rajni verbally that he was not in a position to help Farrakh-Siyyar at that late stage. Steps had already been taken by Hussain Ali to post Maharatta troops all around the fort. The Emperor, he told the fair messenger, was already a prisoner of the Syeds. As a precautionary measure, Ajit Singh lost no time in forwarding the letter from his daughter to Hussain Ali. The fate of the Emperor was sealed.

A king in despair is bereft of gallantry. He is even in search of the means, foul rather than fair, to rehabilitate himself. Farrakh-Siyyar's message to Jai Singh evoked a guarded reaction. The Raja was prepared to fight, but not in the open. He suggested a secret conjunction of their forces outside Delhi, preferably in the vicinity of the hunting retreat near Palam, and thereafter a night-attack on Hussain Ali's forces from two sides. This was a counsel of despair. Farrakh-Siyyar saw in this plan a chance of success, and the very next day he announced "the royal wish to proceed on a hunting expedition for rest and recreation". Qutb-ul-Mulk was too shrewd to miss the real purpose of the outing. Promptly he sent to the palace a special messenger with the following note:

It is learnt the Emperor desires to proceed today on a hunting expedition. Perhaps Your Majesty is not aware that the Peshwa, Balaji Vishwanath, has already made arrangements to present prince Muin-ud-Din at the court tomorrow. To ask the Peshwa to postpone the presentation to a later day may neither be advisable nor tactically beneficial. It is recommended, therefore, that the expedition is postponed for the time. This is the considered opinion of Your Majesty's Prime Minister.

A man in fear may ride anything but a sure-footed steed. Farrakh-Siyyar

was hesitant to disregard the view expressed by the Vizir. Rather, he expressed happiness at the prospect of taking into his possession the much-trumpeted claimant to the throne. He wrote back to Qutb-ul-Mulk that suitable arrangements for the reception of the Peshwa and his ward be made. The hunt was put off indefinitely. Jai Singh was informed accordingly. Farrakh-Siyyar lost the last, slender chance he envisioned of clipping Hussain Ali's wings.

The Syeds moved fast to consolidate their position. Before nightfall, Makhan Singh, a general of Maharaja Ajit Singh, took control of Lahori Gate, and he waited there for the arrival of Qutb-ul-Mulk's forces. All routes to the palace were completely blocked. Maharatta guardsmen were placed at all strategic points in the vicinity of the fort. Imperial guards were disarmed and sent to their barracks. Farrakh-Siyyar was a helpless prisoner. Entrances to the harem were also guarded by Maharatta soldiers. The city was gripped in panic. People gathered in the streets and inquired anxiously if the Emperor was dead or taken prisoner. Arrival on the scene of Maharatta soldiery with their own flags and banners converted confusion into fright, and the crowds surged back into their homes for safety. Meanwhile, the forces of the loyalist Amin Khan came out to quell the disturbance sparked by the Maharattas. For two hours, gruesome pitched battles were fought in and around Chandni Chowk. Hussain Ali waited at Shaista Khan's Baradari at the head of nearly five thousand men, ready to plunge into the fray if needed. He was also maintaining a close watch on happenings in the palace where Qutb-ul-Mulk and Ajit Singh were known to be engaged in discussions with Farrakh-Siyyar.

While two thousand combatants lay dead, or dying, in the streets of Delhi, Farrakh-Siyyar was engaged in what might be called a last-ditch battle for survival inside the small audience chamber of the royal apartment. Kings are made to command, not to be commanded. Despite the knowledge that his days as a monarch were numbered, Farrakh-Siyyar mustered courage, according to Khafi Khan, to tell Qutb-ul-Mulk that if he did not stop using unrespectful language, "I will have the entire house of Syeds trampled to death, and I will follow this act by releasing rats in the trousers of your women". This avalanche of abuse ended only when Qutb-ul-Mulk, red in face, left the chamber with a vow to "feed the vultures with the flesh of an emperor who is bereft of the qualities that distinguish man from beasts".

Within hours of this duel of abuses, the palace was surrounded on all sides by Hussain Ali's crack divisions. Inside, Farrakh-Siyyar, pale and

pulsating in despair, took refuge in a small, back-room of the harem. His mother, wife and daughter, not knowing what had happened, tried to engage him in conversation, but their efforts drew nothing but cheerless blanks. When Farrakh-Siyyar asked for his sword and dagger, the sweetly-scented ladies smelt danger, and they all gathered in the hall of the seraglio to wait for developments. Hardly an hour had gone by when there appeared on the scene a posse of fearsome army officers demanding to know the whereabouts of the Emperor. The mother of Farrakh-Siyyar, Sahib-i-Niswan, came out, sword in hand, and demanded explanation for the aggressive posture. Their spirits slumped somewhat at the sight of this grey-haired gallantry, and their leader replied with a show of respect, "We are under orders to escort the king to another apartment outside the palace. Do please bring him out if he is inside the harem, else we shall force our way in for a thorough search".

At this challenge to their privacy, Fakhr-un-Nissa and other ladies barricaded the door, saying, "You will have to walk over our dead bodies to violate the sanctity of these rooms". This show of resistance by a handful of slender, fair-sex braves caused more amusement than anger. It did not take the officers long to put down their defiance, and to spread themselves out for a room-to-room search of the whole complex of the harem. Soon after, there came from somewhere inside a fairly loud challenging shout, "Do not try to arrest me, and you will not make me kill you". This was surely the voice of Farrakh-Siyyar. Without waiting for the officers to enter his hideout, he came out, like a drunken desperado, brandishing his sword and his dagger. The scuffle that followed was over before it began. Farrakh-Siyyar was chained hand and foot, and dragged down the stairs to courtyard below by long tufts of his hair. Before the wailings of the women died down, Farrakh-Siyyar was lodged in the Triple-Gate solitary cell where seven years earlier was interned Jahandar Shah at the orders of Farrakh-Siyyar himself. The great avenger Time spares nobody.

Like a tree, the Mughal dynasty was beginning to wither long before it fell. The secretly hatched plot to found a new royal regime came to naught on disagreement as to who should ascend the throne, Hassan or Hussain. Age and seniority were on the side of Qutb-ul-Mulk; armed might, in particular the Maharattas, weighed the scales in favour of the younger brother. Hurried consultations, following the arrest of Farrakh-Siyyar, yielded no consensus amongst what came to be known as the Syed lobby. The initial choice fell on Badar Dil, son of Badar Bakht*, but

*Badar Bakht was the son of Aurangzeb's second son, Azam Shah.

his mother and other related ladies refused to surrender the prince to the agents of the Syeds since they believed that Qutb-ul-Mulk harboured plans to liquidate all Mughal claimants to the throne before ascending it himself. Arguments and persuasions backed by threats failed to thaw their opposition to what they held was no more than "yet another Syed strategy to annihilate the Mughals".

The time was running out fast. The throne could not be left vacant after it became known that Farrakh-Siyyar was no longer the Emperor. Already, the fighting in the streets had gathered momentum. The state of kinglessness was traditionally an invitation to chaos to go berserk. The fear of a mass rebellion led the Syeds to get hold of Rafi-ud-Darjat, son of Rafi-ush-Shan*, and they proclaimed him as the new Emperor of Hindustan. Dressed in ordinary cotton clothes and adorned with no insignia of royalty except a pearl necklace thrown around his neck by Qutb-ul-Mulk, he was escorted to the throne by Abdullah Khan on the right and Maharaja Ajit Singh on the left. The brief ceremonial of accession was presided over by the Imam of Jama Masjid, the short-bearded Maulana Muhamad Ghafoor, who later became one of the principal advisers of Emperor Muhammad Shah. A proclamation in the name of the new Emperor was read the next day, 28 February 1719, from the pulpits of all mosques in Delhi. Thus came to an end the six-day period of uncertainty that very nearly touched off a civil war of unpredictable consequences.

At one stage, the speculation ran high that the Rajputs, headed by the Rajas Ajit Singh and Jai Singh, might join forces with the Maharattas, led by Balaji Vishwanath, to put an end to the Mughal rule. The Syeds, however, saved the situation. Self-survival, not the survival of the Timurid dynasty, was the motive behind their speedy action. The pleasure-loving Prime Minister, infatuated with power, stooped not to show concern either for the Islamic principles of justice or for the Mughal tradition of primogeniture. Hussain Ali, though in possession of a greater striking power, was a lesser man, a lesser mischief-maker, a lesser danger to the established regime. He made efforts to be fearful and great, but his anatomy was not cut out for these roles. Qutb-ul-Mulk was a king-maker. His brother only a scene-shifter. The two together made effective partners, singly they lacked the power and stamina to overpower resolute opponents. They were made to swim and sink together.

On the second day of his imprisonment, Farrakh-Siyyar was brought in handcuffs to the presence of Qutb-ul-Mulk to face charges of "complicity against the state, complicity against Islam, and complicity against

*Rafi-ush-Shan was the grandson of Aurangzeb, being the third son of Bahadur Shah I.

those who tried to save the Empire from ruin". In hurt pride and in anger, Farrakh-Siyyar called Qutb-ul-Mulk "a deliberate fool and liar", and he refused to answer questions put to him by a panel of legal experts whom he, in the end, addressed as "a bunch of blinking idiots", and affirmed in a voice of authority that "you who are engaged by a born liar to tell lies about the interpretations of law are all disloyal dogs who till yesterday wagged their tales in my presence to seek unmerited favours". At this display of uncontrolled temper, Qutb-ul-Mulk took out a four-inch long needle from his ivory pen-box, handed it over to the head Qazi with the words, "Justice delayed is justice denied. Run this needle through both the eyes of this unpenitent criminal till he is unable to distinguish white from black. This is the punishment for a foul display of words. The punishment for his foul deeds will be decided later".

At this pronouncement, Farrakh-Siyyar spoke some of the unpleasantest language that ever stained a royal tongue, submitted himself in verse to the will of Allah, and asked the Qazi to do what he had been bidden to do by "one who will burn for ever in the blazing fires of hell". The former Emperor stood the ordeal without a moan or a whimper of protest. Blood streaked out of the sockets of his eyes as a couple of gendarmes escorted Farrakh-Siyyar to the darkness of his cell. The first Emperor in Mughal history to be blinded, he spent the next forty-eight hours in soulful prayers for "the darkness without to become the light within". Nobody was permitted to see him in the cell. It was only after two weeks that his mother and his wife were allowed to have a short meeting with him in the first-floor waiting-room of the mini-prison. According to Khafi Khan, "they spoke to each other in tears, not in words". During the course of the meeting, Farrakh-Siyyar covered his punctured eyes with a piece of cloth bearing stains of blood. They were never to sit together again.

Farrakh-Siyyar spent the next two months in utter misery. The food supplied to him once a day was such that "even a hungry dog will scamper away after inhaling a breath of its foul smell". The water supplied to him for ablutions and for drinking was dirty. According to the official historian, he made some futile attempts, in collusion with guardsmen, to escape to the camp of Raja Jai Singh. In the end, he was reported to have committed suicide by dashing his head time and again against the wall of his cell.

This story about the manner of his death is contrary to facts as revealed by foreign travellers and other non-official chroniclers. He was done to death on the night of 27-28 April 1719, by a team of professional executioners. His last words were, "Farewell, Time will discover the

truth". The next day, 29 April, his body was dragged down to the first floor for formal identification by a team of *umra*. This done, an announcement of the death was made by the beat of drum. The people of Delhi gathered in large numbers in mosques and at public places to hold prayers for the former king. The body was laid to rest within the complex of Humayun's tomb at the place where the body of his father, Azim-ush-Shan, was interred before it was transported to Aurangabad.

Thus comes to an end the story of the reign of Abul Muzaffar Muin-ud-Din Muhammad Farrakh-Siyyar Baksh*. Reckoning from the day he declared himself Emperor at Patna in 1712 to the time of his death, his rule lasted seven years, one month and nine days. This period is reduced to six years and seventeen days if the calculation is made from the day of his entry into Delhi to the day of his arrest and imprisonment.

His successor, Rafi-ud-Darjat, ascended the throne on the last day of February 1719.

The Shahid-i-Marhum** was a virtual prisoner of the Syeds throughout his reign. He rose to the throne with their help and, in the end, lost it because of their intrigues and lust for power. In coming to grips with and defeating Jahandar Shah, he brought to bear on his action an unexpectedly high quotient of wisdom and courage. Seven years later when called upon to challenge and demolish the rising power of the Syed brothers, he fell because of an equally unexpected show of cowardice and foolishness.

Despite a matrimonial alliance, Farrakh-Siyyar failed miserably to enlist on his side the support of the Marwar Rajputs. An indecisive mind was perhaps his greatest foe. A traditional ally of the Mughals, Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur offered to fight the Syeds with all his forces, but Farrakh-Siyyar was not able to resolve in time the battle between will and will not that raged within him. Perhaps it may not be wrong to affirm that he lost the throne, as also his head, because of an innate hesitance to call a friend a friend and a foe a foe. Doubts of fidelity unnerved him in one case, and fears of defeat in the other. He pinned his hopes on nature, forgetting that the armies of God seldom went to the help of the weak and the timid.

During his short reign, Farrakh-Siyyar did little of any real or potential consequence except marry Bai Indar Kanwar, daughter of Maharaja Ajit

*A few contemporary historians give his full name as Jalaluddin Muhammad Farrakh-Siyyar Baksh.

**This was the name given to Farrakh-Siyyar by Mirza Abdul Qadir, a Sunni chronicler who regarded the Shiite Syeds as "bad at their best" and criticised their intrigues against the Emperor in words of extreme severity.

Singh. This seemingly beneficial alliance did not yield the expected dividends, again because of his unwarranted hopes and ill-advised fears. Together with Ajit Singh and Jai Singh, he possessed the armed capability to cut the Syeds to size. That demolishing act was, however, not on the card of Fate. The nature had some more reverses and heartaches in store for the Mughals. The Syeds too had to rise a little higher before the inexorable law of retribution was to take matters in its own hands.

Indar Kunwar returned to Jodhpur forty-two days after the announcement of Farrakh-Siyyar's death. She carried with her all the dowry and gifts of gold and pearl given her at the time of her wedding in 1715. She travelled in a royal palanquin complete with every insignia of her status. An armed Rajput contingent accompanied her. All ladies of the harem, including the teen-age daughter of Farrakh-Siyyar who later married Muhammad Shah, came out of the palace to bid her farewell. This was a sad departure for the wife of an Emperor. The details of her later life are not known.

Farrakh-Siyyar left behind no male progeny. His two sons, Farrakanda-Siyyar (Jahangir Shah) and Jahan Murad Shah died in infancy: The latter, the only child of Fakhr-un-Nissa*, passed away in 1718 following an attack of small-pox. It is not known whether any child was born to the daughter of the Raja of Kishtwar, whom Farrakh-Siyyar took into his harem, perhaps as a concubine, in 1716. The name of no other woman is associated with this fair, full-chested monarch. He died at the age of thirty-six, leaving behind only two widows and a daughter to mourn the event. The people of Delhi were grieved much at his passing away, not because they admired him but because they hated the Syeds. The stage seemed set for one of those dramas that defied both reason and wishful thinking as to the final outcome. The Syeds on the one hand and the soldiery of Raja Sahu on the other confused both the friends and foes of the Mughals.

What next? The crystal ball was foggy.

*Fakhr-un-Nissa was the daughter of Sadat Khan, a Persian nobleman who died two days after Farrakh-Siyyar's deposition. He was eighty.

Rafi-ud-Darjat

Chapter 11

UNIQUE HERITAGE

THE short reigns* of the two sons of Rafi-ush-Shan — Rafi-ud-Darjat and Rafi-ud-Daula — were a tragedy based on the intrigues, lusts and ambitions of the Syed brothers, Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali. In the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar, the former held the post of Grand Vizir with the title Qutb-ul-Mulk and the latter that of Commander-in-Chief with the title Amir-ul-Umra. They were both perhaps obsessed with the vision of a new dynasty succeeding the Mughals. Their dream might have come true had their been only one aspirant for the honour of being the founder of the new line of Emperors. Mutual distrust undid them. Suspicion is a habit that feeds on itself; it has no boundaries, neither has it an inbuilt mechanism for self-regulation.

The Syeds began by seeing in the Mughals devils intent upon their destruction, and they ended by considering each other as a selfish, unscrupulous creature yearning for unrestricted power. Both possessed large personal armies, large stores of wealth, and a large number of fair-weather friends waiting in the wings for opportunities to gather fame and riches. Their siege was in their own respective sources of strength and influence. They looked at each other with one brotherly and one stepbrotherly eye. In this lack of unity between themselves, there lay for the Mughals and their friends a chance to close their ranks and rehabilitate their authority. The story of the next hundred years of the Mughal presence in Hindustan is a dramatic narrative of failures, setbacks and lost opportunities; it is also a narrative of the increasing decadence of the mind and spiritual values that set in following the death of Alamgir. For a large majority of the nobility, this period was no fairy-time for sleep and love-making; it was a testing time for truth and chivalry. Many a brave

*Rafi-ud-Darjat ruled for three months, nine days and his elder brother, Rafi-ud-Daula for four months, sixteen days. Their deaths, in all probability, were caused by poisoning.

soul perished in the turmoil; a few that escaped destruction found it profitable to throw in their weight on the side of the invaders from across the Hindukush, as also on the side of the white adventurers from across the seas. The story is indeed a thrilling one, rich in every nuance of intrigue, treachery, over-ambition, courage, cowardice and faithlessness.

An accession is half itself when the new monarch is led to the throne by two men of doubtful loyalties. The twenty-year old Rafi-ud-Darjat, a handsome youth of little experience in the wily arts of governance, was escorted to the shimmering Takht-i-Taus by Qutb-ul-Mulk on the right and Maharaja Ajit Singh on the left. This show of Mughal-Rajput unity in the selection of the successor of Farrakh-Siyyar was a historical landmark inasmuch as never before had religion taken the back-seat at a coronation ceremonial. Muslim priests and Rajput clergymen chanted in turn hymns from their respective holy books as Rafi-ud-Darjat took his seat on the gilded pedestal. In normal times, the occasion would have meant a major step forward on the path of Akbar's Sulah-i-Kul (at peace with all). The circumstances did not, however, warrant this reading. The new Emperor was an offspring of discord, not of oneness. He was raised to the throne for considerations of personal gain, not of the national good. Qutb-ul-Mulk saw in him a pliant tool for promotion of his own interests, and to Ajit Singh he was no more than a means to remain on the right side of the powerful Vizir. Fear not hope, filled the throne-room as the bearded Chamberlain, Syed Abdul Hamid, read out the proclamation detailing the policies and titles of the new ruler. He declared loud and clear that "Abul Barkat Sultan Shams-ud-Din Muhammad Rafi-ud-Darjat Padshah Ghazi has been called to the throne by the divine will to spread happiness and prosperity, as also to consolidate the Mughal traditions of tolerance, throughout the Empire". There was no mention in the announcement of the Emperor's obligations to any one religion or race—a departure from normal practice that made the conservatives stroke their beards in disdain and disbelief. One later-day writer compared Hassan Ali to a savage bull which, in time, was left with no alternative but to bear the yoke, that is, the yoke of intolerant fundamentalism.

Rafi-ud-Darjat, though inexperienced, was neither inefficient nor unintelligent. Historians speak of him as a monarch endowed with much commonsense and devotion to duty. He spoke low if he spoke love and kindness, but his voice became loud and impatient if he spoke in anger and bitterness. In other words, he had not been tutored in the fine kingly art of not exposing his feelings to the public hearing. This shortfall in his

composition brought him into conflict with Qutb-ul-Mulk on the very second day of his reign. Chronograms, recording the date of his accession, were submitted by many well-known poets. He rejected them, one by one, for reasons of language and propriety. A composition by the poet-laureate, Ustad Mehdi Hassan, was thrown by him virtually in the face of the Vizir with the words, "If this is a chronogram then, let me tell the Qutb-ul-Mulk, that the writer is an ass" Hassan Ali withdrew in anger, resolved not to submit any more compositions for approval. A month later, Rafi-ud-Darjat accepted for official record a brief seven-word piece sent to him by a holy man of Sirhind; it stated merely, "his time is full of dignity". The King's preference for simplicity of thought and words was praised by the people in general and the court *ulema* in particular. Even Hassan Ali commented favourably on this selection. This praise surprised the Syed's entourage of literary men. Not to admire was all the literary art Qutb-ul-Mulk was known to possess.

Liberalism was the plume the new Emperor liked to wear. This anti-conservative stand was of a piece with the long-term plans of the House of Syeds. A new dynasty could be founded, in the reckoning of Qutb-ul-Mulk, only with the unreserved support of the Rajputs and other major non-Muslim sections of the nobility. Maharaja Ajit Singh was, therefore, a trump card he was keen to keep safe in his pocket. To placate him was to win the support of his thirty thousand well-armed, well-trained soldiers. It was, therefore, no surprise that the first act of the new ruler was to abolish Jizya and other discriminatory taxes against non-Muslims. Both Ajit Singh and Rattan Chand, chief adviser of Qutb-ul-Mulk, congratulated one another on this reversal of the economic policies of Aurangzeb. They hoped the measure would enrich the Prime Minister's image at the court and outside, and thus strengthen their own hold on the affairs of state.

The Rajas tended to underestimate the strength and influence of the dyed-in-the-wool conservatists who looked back on Alamgir as their Messiah and his policies as the surest means to further strengthen the foundations of the Empire. Led secretly by Nizam-ul-Mulk and some other lesser loyalists, they stirred up fear among the Shaikhs and Maulanas whose trade was religion and religion self-interest. Uncertainty about the future gripped every heart in the capital. Few sought audience with the Emperor for dread of alienating one faction or the other. Instead, they gathered in mosques and temples to pray for peace and stability. In this silent drama, Rafi-ud-Darjat was a mere spectator, a helpless prisoner of the Syeds. All the gates of his palace were guarded

day and night by handpicked soldiers drawn from Hussain Ali's southern contingents. The siege was so complete as to "make it impossible for the monarch even to come out for a whiff of fresh air in the garden".

During his three-month reign, Rafi-ud-Darjat crossed the boundary of the palace only twice — once to facilitate Qutb-ul-Mulk on the birth of a daughter, and the other to attend the wedding of a son of Amir-ul-Umra. The Malika, eighteen-year-old Inayat Banu, accompanied him on either occasion. Endowed with long silken hair, big black eyes and a complexion as mellow as the moon, she was the queen of good looks, a little short of stature but nonetheless divine. Shortly before the death of Rafi-ud-Darjat, the pleasure-hunter Qutb-ul-Mulk did the most impudent act of his life when he wrote a love-letter to Inayat Banu, in which he waxed eloquent in praise of "her looks, her eyes and her brow", and offered her "such comforts as would make the houris of heaven jealous of her luxurious living" if she agreed to enter his harem as "the most respected partner in my joys, riches and fame". He also hinted at the "fast-approaching end of her husband's barren life", and ended with a verse in which he described love as eternal and beauty as God's stamp of excellence on His handiwork".

Qutb-ul-Mulk's every word was a stab in the heart of Inayat Banu. Outraged, she cut off her yard-long lustrous hair and threw them in the face of the messenger, Sadr-un-Nissa, and told her in a voice pulsating with anger, "Go and give these to your master. In case you come again, I will take out my eyes with a pen-knife and send them to the shameless Syed with a curse that God inject blindness in the eyes of every member of his family". The proud Vizir swallowed the rubuff. He made no further approach to woo her. The Emperor died shortly afterwards. Inayat Banu joined the ranks of the forgotten queens of the Mughal dynasty. It is said that Hassan Ali was never the same passion-propelled animal again. Defeat in love is the surest herald of scalding sorrow and sobriety.

The reluctance of Nizam-ul-Mulk to toe the line of his thinking sat heavily on Hassan Ali's mind. Here was a powerful nobleman with considerable following in the south and the north determined to oppose all underhand moves to write finis to the Mughal rule. Qutb-ul-Mulk invited him more than once for friendly talks at his mansion, but he did not budge from his resolve to keep clear of the Syeds. The haughty Hussain Ali could not take these rebuffs lying down. He recommended the use of force and, if needed, the execution of Nizam-ul-Mulk to clear the way for the takeover. The circumspect elder brother was, however, against that extreme step; he preferred instead to give time the chance to

break the obdurance of the ultra-loyalist Nizam-ul-Mulk. Meanwhile, he secured the gutless Emperor's assent for the appointment of Nizam-ul-Mulk as Governor of Malwa. The latter hesitated to accept the offer, but later, at the insistence of the king himself, he prepared to move out of Delhi. His decision to take along with him all his wealth and all members of his family confirmed the general belief that he harboured plans to wage a war against the Syeds if the developments warranted that course.

No rational man can quit the scene of his activities without uneasy apprehensions. Nizam-ul-Mulk feared the worst, not only for the Emperor but for all those who chose to stand by him. His reading of the Syeds' intentions came true as the properties of all the king's supporters were seized one by one, and some of them thrown into distant prisons to await death either by poisoning or slow starvation.

Extreme misery showed on the shrivelled face of the once most powerful nobleman at court, Itqad Khan (Muhammad Murad) as he was whisked away in chains to spend the remaining years of his life in the solitary dungeon of a prison directly under the charge of the heartless Hussain Ali. All his wealth, the largest hoard ever accumulated by a Mughal courtier, was appropriated. It took a team of twelve carts twenty days to transport his riches to the royal treasury. Some historians wrote that more than half of Murad's collection of precious stones, valued at rupees two hundred million, found their way to the mansion of Qutb-ul-Mulk. This charge may or may not be true, but it is on record that over a hundred seized properties were distributed among the friends and relatives of the Syeds. According to Khafi Khan, the two brothers nearly came to blows over the manner in which this vast wealth was disposed of. The dispute was partly settled through the intervention of the soft-spoken Rattan Chand. The fifty-fifty formula saved an ugly situation. Half the appropriated properties and wealth were placed at the disposal of Hussain Ali for such use as he might like to make of them. The remaining half were handed over unconditionally to Hassan Ali. There is no way to certify as to what went to whom. According to one account, the Syeds became the two richest men in the world. The wealth went to their heads, and in the end it did what wealth invariably does; it robbed them of their wits, their friends and also of their faith. Every one can benefit by wealth but he that has it.

In younger days, Hassan Ali had a heart as sound as a bell. Now, the money-lust having taken control, his reactions were slow, his intelligence foggy, and his mind indecisive. The important decisions he took at this stage savoured of suspicion and revenge, not of self-confidence

and fairplay. The family of Sadat Khan, father-in-law of Farrakh-Siyyar, was denied any part of the deceased nobleman's wealth. For residence they were allotted a miserable looking time-worn two-storey house in a congested area of Delhi. The allowances fixed for them were hardly sufficient to keep their bodies and souls together. They perished one by one of disease and malnutrition. Similarly, the treatment meted out to Shaista Khan, maternal uncle of Farrakh-Siyyar, and his family was nothing but a reflection of the wretchedness of Hassan Ali's soul. Their mansion, near the fort, was stripped of all costly decorations and pieces of furniture. For days the Khan slept at night on floor before a family friend sent across for him a wooden divan of his size. Reduced to extreme penury, he left for Kashmir in the hope of being looked after there by the relatives of his sister. Several petitions made by him to Rafi-ud-Darjat for financial assistance went unheeded.

The two other top-ranking courtiers of Farrakh-Siyyar — Afzal Khan and Salabat Khan — were subjected to shocking humiliations. They both left Delhi in disgust, not knowing how and from where would come the wherewithal to keep themselves alive with a degree of honour. The heart of Qutb-ul-Mulk remained insensitive to their plight; rather, he gloated over what he believed was the right punishment for their misdeeds. In one of his cryptic letters to Afzal Khan, he wrote, "Blame neither God, nor the Emperor. You yourself are the architect of your predicament. Bear it all with grace".

Afzal Khan was a well-finished man in every respect. He made no reply to the Vizir's word of advice. Instead, he sent to Qutb-ul-Mulk the gift of a beggar's bowl with a note, "This is all that I possess. You may need it more than I do in the days to come".

Qutb-ul-Mulk took no note of the implied prophecy. He lived in the present. The future was out of his thoughts for the time. The conscience of a power-drunk wealthy Vizir was little stirred by the mystique of the begging bowl. In life's many shifting scenes, what sublime stories are seen — tears of the fallen brave and follies of the wise. Few realize that wealth, as such, is of little importance; it lasts only a short while.

A foreign traveller, James Patterson, happened to die in Delhi at this time. In his diary there was recorded a remark that bore unmistakable testimony to the heartlessness of Qutb-ul-Mulk. "If I had the strength to hold a pen, I would have recorded the tales of injustices current in this metropolis. The two Syeds are demons incarnate. Even the Emperor shakes with fear at their sight. The once powerful noblemen are reduced to dust. There is bewilderment on every face. The future holds little hope

for the common man".

The presence in and around Delhi of large contingents of Hussain Ali's Maharatta troops added to the fear that plagued every citizen. Their orgies of loot and licentious behaviour left the people guessing about the real intentions of the Peshwa. At the instance of the Sajda Nashin (high priest) of the Shahi mosque, the *ulema* of the seven sectors of the capital sent a long petition to the Prime Minister, requesting for "early riddance from the Maharatta menace that hangs day and night over our heads". The petition made a strong plea for sending the Peshwa and his plunderers back to their homes in the Deccan, and it ended on a note of carefully-worded warning that "our patience has in it an element of impatience".

Qutb-ul-Mulk discussed the matter with Hussain Ali. The latter, at first, was reluctant to concede the request, but in the end gave in on an assurance that he would be allowed to raise an additional five thousand men for his personal security. The deal was struck in the presence of Rafi-ud-Darjat who later set his seal to a declaration setting the date for withdrawal of Maharatta forces from the north. In view of Hussain Ali's "promises and pledges to the Peshwa", the Maharattas were to take along with them all members of the House of Shivaji who had been in prison in Delhi since the days of Aurangzeb. These included Madan Singh, son of Shivaji, and many near relatives, male and female, of Shambuji. This was a signal triumph for Balaji Vishwanath who was under an oath not to leave Delhi unless "all members of the family of Maharaja Shivaji are restored to me with honour". Rafi-ud-Darjat received Madan Singh in audience before his departure, and the Emperor conferred on him and other members of the family honours in keeping with their status. In addition, the documents conceding the Maharatta demand for Swaraj (home rule) were handed over to the Peshwa with befitting solemnity.*

The departure of Maharatta soldiery was a relief to the people of Delhi. They were yet not, however, free of the menace of communal bitterness that had of late gripped the city. The presence in and around Delhi of large numbers of Rajasthan troops was a factor that could not but disturb their peace of mind. Nearly forty thousand well-armed Marwar troops were a part of the entourage of Maharaja Ajit Singh who was a partner of the Syeds in raising Rafi-ud-Darjat to the throne. The high-

*Under this concession, all territories belonging to the Maharatta at the time of Shivaji's death in 1681 were banded together in what came to be known as the Maharatta kingdom. The Maharattas were also given the right to collect, 'chauth', that is, one-fourth of all revenue levies in the south. Another one-tenth of the remaining three-fourths revenue was to be deposited in the Maharatta treasury at the end of the financial year.

handed behaviour of his followers was in proportion to the favour in which he was held at the court. The reports of their misdeeds provoked Hussain Ali to lodge a strong protest with the Maharaja who, in turn, approached Qutb-ul-Mulk for restraining the commander-in-chief from taking any harsh step against his men. The trio discussed the issues raised by the complaint in the presence of the Shahi Imam (King's priest). The last-named, a grey-bearded ecclesiast of high standing, made an eloquent plea for "ridding the capital of troops owning allegiance to another state". In a fairly lengthy description of the plight of the citizens, he observed :

The citizens are struck dumb with terror. They seldom go to sleep at night, and the imperial gendarmes are seldom awake. The drunken soldiers roam about the streets in unashamed exhilaration. Their contempt of decency is an affront to civilised behaviour. They seem to be in love with anarchy and disorder. At the slightest provocation, or no provocation at all, they commit acts of such heartless profanity as cannot be described in words. The lives of men are not safe, neither is the honour of women. Young girls and boys are spirited away to their camps, and after a day or two they are thrown out to find the way back to their homes. This state of bewildering lawlessness must end lest, out of desperation, the people resort to violence in self-defence. We, the residents of Delhi, have never had it so bad as today. The things are not likely to improve for as long as the movements of Marwar troops are not controlled effectively. In our reckoning, the only way to restore normality is to disarm these unruly, passion-powered plunderers, and to order them to return to their homes without delay. We respect the Maharaja, but we respect more the honour and security of the faithful. We shall await your decision before deciding what to do next.

After saying what he had come to say, the Imam left the meeting. According to the official news-writer, a fairly heated discussion ensued among the three dignitaries. Hussain Aii supported the recommendation of the High Priest, and suggested, without mincing words, that the Maharaja return to his state. The more experienced and worldly-wise Qutb-ul-Mulk agreed with his brother only partly. He was of the view that communal amity could be restored if only a section of the Rajput force was ordered to leave Delhi; also, he was opposed to the Maharaja's return to Jodhpur. Instead, he expressed willingness to temporarily post the Marwar ruler to Gujarat with an enhanced rank, and to permit him to name a deputy to look after his affairs in the capital. The Prime Minister

prevailed upon the Maharaja to accept this middle course "in the larger interests of the Empire". Two days later, Rafi-ud-Darjat gave formal approval to the recommendation of the Vizir.

This arrangement assuaged somewhat the wrath of the people. They continued, however, to make angry protests against "the killer of his son-in-law", and they demanded his expulsion without delay. The march of events resulted, however, in quick changes of scenes in Delhi. Ajit Singh was prevented from leaving for Ahmedabad. Neither was any part of his force disbanded. Qutb-ul-Mulk was in dire need of him and his troops.

In the first exhilaration of entry to the top echelons of the court, the Mughal nobility swore eternal loyalty to the Emperor; later they invariably pledged themselves to work for unceasing self-interest. Qutb-ul-Mulk was no exception to this rule. Not only was he guided by considerations of personal gain; he carried disloyalty to a point where it coincided with the liquidation of the Emperor by whatever means available. The revolt in Agra at the instance of factions opposed to the Syeds served as fuel to the confusion prevailing in the capital. For self-survival, the Syed brothers needed support from whatever quarter it could be gathered. Also, they prepared themselves for the extreme eventuality of having to change the occupancy of the throne once again in case that course assured their continuance in key positions. They dreaded to die while still alive. That misery was to them the climax of all human ills. Ajit Singh's departure did not fit in with their plan to combat insurrection and to protect their own positions.

The sky was darkly, deeply beautifully blue when, on 19 April 1719, Mir Sen, a surgeon formerly in the service of Hussain Ali, placed the crown on the head of Niku-Siyyar, eldest surviving son of the youngest son of Aurangzeb, Muhammad Akbar. This was the climax of a revolt by the garrison of the Agra fort against what they called "the puppet king Rafi-ud-Darjat". The seventy-year-old Safvi Khan, a former commander of the citadel, was the brain behind the insurrection. It was he who wrote secret letters to Raja Jai Singh, the Jat chief Chabela Ram and Nizam-ul-Mulk, urging them to lend him their support for "rectifying the wrongs committed by the Syed brothers". His communication to Jai Singh, sent to Jaipur by the hand of one Ganpat Rai, read, in part:

Your Highness, the events in Delhi are heading towards a crisis. Many times you have fought, side by side with the Mughals, to enrich the image of the empire, as also to save it from crumbling under the weight of its enemies. The treatment meted out to Shahid-i-Marhum and the way in

which the second son of Rafi-ush-Shan was placed on the throne are unmistakable testimony to the villainy of Abdullah Khan and his brother. These two devils in the garb of men have humiliated and confiscated the properties of all friends of the former Emperor. They have appropriated to themselves the incalculable wealth of the realm, and are currently engaged in finding the means to seize the Empire by force and to found a new dynasty of Syed rulers.

It is our common duty at this hour of crisis to coordinate our resources in an effort to save the Empire from disruption. To that end, the loyalists in Agra have decided to place on the throne the senior-most scion of the Mughal dynasty. He is Niku-Siyyar, son of Prince Muhammad Akbar. For thirty-eight long years*, this amiable grandson of Alamgir Padshah, has been living as a prisoner in the fort at Agra. The garrison admire the qualities of the heart he is endowed with. The denial of scholastic education has not come in the way of his developing into a man of honour. He will make a fine king. The traditions of the Empire will be safe in his keeping.

It needs to be stressed that our planned move is not a revolt against the Empire. Far from it. We aim at preserving the Empire by overthrowing a self-seeking junta of small-minded men determined to use the present monarch for their personal, material ends. The Syeds, not the harmless Rafi-ud-Darjat, will be our targets for attack.

Similar letters have been addressed to some prominent men who, we know, will be in sympathy with the cause we have chosen to uphold. These include the Jat chief Chabela Ram and Nizam-ul-Mulk. We trust they will respond to our appeal with enthusiasm. Together, we may be able, God willing, to rid the Empire of a grave menace. We shall await your reaction before taking the planned step. Secrecy is the greatest need of the hour. We need to move with utmost circumspection. The Syeds have their agents everywhere. You may send a reply by the hand of the bearer of this note. He is fully trustworthy.

The response from Jai Singh was anything but enthusiastic. He sent per Ganpat Rai only a verbal reply, saying that his decision would be sent to Agra as soon as he was in a position to ascertain facts from Delhi. In fact, before committing himself to any anti-Syed move, he wanted to know if

*Muhammad Akbar staged a revolt against his father in 1681. His two sons — Niku-Siyyar and Muhammad Asghar — and two daughters were made prisoners. They were lodged in the fort at Agra. Adequate arrangements for their education were not made. In fact, the two sons never crossed the gates of the fort. Niku-Siyyar was born in 1679.

Nizam-ul-Mulk had thrown his weight on the side of the would-be rebels. Mir Sen had actually met Nizam-ul-Mulk when the latter was on the way to Malwa. He too was hesitant to promise support without knowing whether the Rajputs and Jats were prepared to make a common cause against the rulers in Delhi. Chabela Ram was the only chief who assured Mir Sen of his assistance. In fact, his troops, numbering about five thousand, were camped a few miles from Agra, waiting for a signal from their commander to jump into the fray. Though disappointed at the circumspection of those who he thought would welcome an opportunity to oust Abdullah Khan, yet he did not give up his planned move.

In half despair, half hope, Mir Sen sent a communication to his former patron, Hussain Ali, in which he made a stong plea for replacement of Rafi-ud-Darjat by Niku-Siyyar. The latter, he said, was the most senior lineal descendant of Aurangzeb, and thus the throne belonged to him by the inalienable right of heritage. Hussain Ali took a strong exception to "this interference by a self-seeking maniac in the affairs of the Empire", and immediately initiated steps to defuse the threatened revolt. Samandar Khan was named new commander of the fort, and he was asked to proceed to Agra immediately at the head of a fairly large army. One of the strongest generals of the day, Ghairat Khan, was assigned the duty of safeguarding Agra and taking such steps as might be called for to put down the insurrection. An able administrator and experienced soldier, Haidar Quli Khan, was appointed to assist Ghairat Khan on and off the field. Hussain Ali himself prepared to leave for Agra in case Ghairat Khan was not able to bring Mir Sen and his companions-in-revolt to book.

Meanwhile, Agra was gripped with fear and indefinable unease that come in the wake of rumours utterly unrelated to facts. The imperial army took up positions all around the fort, making it nearly impossible for the garrison to obtain fresh supplies of food. The besieged resorted to sporadic gunfire, but their offensive lacked the punch to make any impression on the imperial army. The Jat adventurer, Chamaran, made a few raids on the Mughal posts from the east, but they yielded no result. Ghairat Khan gathered strength as the days went by, and it became clear that the revolt was all but over.

Meanwhile, Rafi-ud-Darjat died in Delhi. The story of his passing away will be told after the account of the revolt in Agra is completed. Continuity of narrative is preferable to chronological order.

There is a tide in the affairs of men which, at the ebb, may lead to the sands of frustration. Niku-Siyyar read correctly the writing on the wall,

and in a bid to save himself the fate that invariably befell the vanquished rebel princes, he entered into secret correspondence with Qutb-ul-Mulk. While asserting his claim to the throne, he pledged himself on oath to let the Syed brothers continue in their posts and to extend to them the honours and privileges which they had enjoyed since the days of Farrakh-Siyyar. "Let there be peace", begged Niku-Siyyar, and in return he offered to Qutb-ul-Mulk and his brother a free hand in managing the affairs of the kingdom. "Illegitimate occupants of the throne, like glass, are ever in danger", he wrote while affirming the legality of his claim.

Perhaps this communication was the brain-child of Mir Sen who too had come to realise the hopelessness of further resistance to Ghairat Khan. The besieged were trying to get out of difficult positions they had landed themselves in. The time was on the side of the imperialists. The rebels did not possess the resources to withstand a long siege; neither were they blessed with the courage to come out and risk an engagement in the open. Thirteen hundred medium-size guns, manned partly by European artillery men, were the only effective weaponry at the disposal of Mir Sen, and this by itself was not sufficient to check the offensive launched by the well-equipped contingents of Haidar Quli Khan.

The secret initiative taken by Niku-Siyyar was, therefore, a compulsion, a move to salvage whatever he could from the wreckage of his hopes. A men of ambition, he hoped for the best when he could, and he dismayed quickly when it was realized that to hope was to ask for the moon. He was not one of those who knew of no middle stage between hope and death.

It was very surprising that Qutb-ul-Mulk came very near to accepting the offer made by Niku-Siyyar. To him one puppet king was as good as the other for as long as there was no encroachment on his authority. Hussain Ali had, however, different views. He told his brother in plain words that the acceptance of Niku-Siyyar as emperor tantamounted to admission of defeat. He was reported to have told his brother, "Our prestige will be in the dust if the rebels are not punished suitably. The place for Niku-Siyyar is in a prison, not on the throne. The arch-conspirator, Mir Sen, must be seized and cut to pieces before our troops are given the order to halt operations. There can be no compromise with rebels"

No reply was sent to Niku-Siyyar's overture. Instead, Ghairat Khan was ordered to press the siege and to take suitable steps, military and otherwise, to force the garrison to surrender. The resulting tightening of the blockade disspirited Mir Sen, and he initiated steps to secure

assistance from outside. First, an agent by the name of Bal Nath was sent out on a hazardous mission to carry a request for help to Raja Jai Singh. The attempt failed as Bal Nath was captured by a roving contingent of the imperial army. In his possession were found several letters, addressed to Mir Sen and Safvi Khan by commanders in the royal army. Whether or not these letters were forged documents is hard to tell. In Mughal times this was, however, a very popular means of putting an enemy off the scent. What happened to Bal Nath is not known. In all probability his death came at the hands of an executioner.

Not to be baulked by this rebuff, Mir Sen prevailed upon Mirza Asghari, nephew of Niku-Siyyar, to attempt a dash to Amber and ask Jai Singh for help. His mission also failed, not because of enemy alertness but for reasons of female frustration. The Mirza was engaged to be married to Hamida Sultanam, niece of Rafi-ud-Darjat from his mother's side. This engagement was arranged by Mir Sen for his personal ends. She was, however, in love with a junior garrison commander and had asked Niku-Siyyar for permission to marry him. Mir Sen objected, and he threatened to expel the officer from the fort in case she persisted in her resolve. When a maidservant brought her the news of the planned mission of Mirza Asghari to Jaipur, she lost no time in informing the besiegers, by the hand of a faithful eunuch, Abbas, of the Mirza's planned escape. The letter was seized by the enemy as he came down the western ramparts by means of a rope. When produced before Hussain Ali the next day, the Mirza burst into tears while asking for mercy. The Syeds spared his life, and gave orders for his imprisonment in the fort of Salimgarh. The report of his capture dismayed Mir Sen. He prepared to open negotiations with Ghairat Khan for surrender. There was little hope now of any help reaching him from outside. Secret messages sent to Chabela Ram at Allahabad had drawn blanks. The revolt had virtually come to an end. In the Mughal times there was no treachery but a woman was at one end of it. The fate of the besieged was sealed.

Knowing as he did the state of panic inside the fort, Hussain Ali established contact with Safvi Khan, setting unconditional surrender as the price for pardon and safe passage to his home town in the north-west. The aged nobleman, realizing the futility of further resistance, opened the gates of the citadel on 12 August 1719, and he stood bareheaded in the Hall of Audience to hand over the keys to Ghairat Khan. The latter made a triumphal entry along with Raja Makhan Singh and Samandar Khan after posting imperial guards at all strategic points. He sent three top commanders to the royal apartment in search of Niku-Siyyar. It was

not long before the trio found Timur II* hiding in a small room of the seraglio. His mother sat by him, and she began loud lamentations as her son was asked to prepare to leave for a meeting with Amir-ul-Umra Hussain Ali. Niku-Siyyar was neither chained nor spoken to with harshness. He comforted his mother, and came out without uttering a word of protest or sorrow.

The search for Mir Sen ended on a different note. The panic-stricken Raja Birbal** swallowed a doze of lethal poison when he heard the sound of soldiers' footsteps outside his apartment. He was half dead when a party of royal gendarmes broke open the door and began putting chains around his legs and arms. A dagger was thrust into his chest as he abused "the pig, Qutb-ul-Mulk" in a voice too feeble to be heard by everybody standing around. Later, Hussain Ali ordered his head to be cut and sent to the Vizir at Delhi.

Hussain Ali received Niku-Siyyar and his nephew, Baba Mughal, with a rare pretence of courtesy. He stood before the grandson of Alamgir with folded hands, and asked him with utmost reverence about the health and welfare of his mother and other members of the family.Under the strain of repentance, Niku-Siyyar let loose a tempest of unashamed sobs and sighs, begged for mercy, and took many an oath to pledge loyalty to the throne. Hussain Ali stepped forward, took him in his arms, and told him that "the one in whose veins runs the blood of Alamgir Padshah deserves our respect". A message was sent to the mother of Niku-Siyyar, assuring her that no harm would come to her son and that suitable arrangements would be made for the "family of prince Muhammad Akbar" to spend in comfort the remaining years of their lives. The meeting ended with a sumptuous meal served for Niku-Siyyar and Baba Mughal. Hussain Ali sat for the meal at the right of the royal brethren. Raja Makhan Singh took the seat on the left.

A day later, Niku-Siyyar left Agra under heavy escort for the fort of Salimgarh in Delhi. He died four years later on 11 March 1723. A modest grave in the vicinity of the Qutb became his last resting place.

Meanwhile, the short reign of Rafi-ud-Darjat came to a premature end in Delhi. Official historians wrote that the twenty-year-old Emperor died of tuberculosis, but official historians do not always tell the truth. There was a strong suspicion that Rafi-ud-Darjat died of poisoning. During the short period he held the imperial seal in his hand, the independence and

*This was the title Niku-Siyyar took on declaring himself Emperor two months earlier.

**This was the title under which he assumed the office of Prime Minister in the high rank of seven thousand following Niku-Siyyar's declaration of independence.

common sense he brought to bear when taking important decisions surprised Qutb-ul-Mulk. Rafi-ud-Darjat did not turn out to be the rubber stamp that Hassan Ali expected. Also, the super-sensuous Vizir was resolved to force the queen, Inayat Banu, to enter his harem. Rafi-ud-Darjat stood in the way of the fulfilment of his material ambitions on the one hand and the yearnings of his heart on the other. The Emperor had to be removed from the throne by whatever means available. A doze of slow-action poison suggested itself. Rafi-ud-Darjat, a youth of not very robust physique, began to show signs of "a grave illness" earlier than expected. At the "advice" of a panel of physicians, he was deposed on 4 June 1719, and his elder brother, Rafi-ud-Daula* was proclaimed Emperor with the title Shah Jahan II.

A week later, on 11 June, the poison did what poison was expected to do. Rafi-ud-Darjat died in a proxysm of pains in all his bones. Inayat Banu tore her hair in grief, and she proclaimed more than once in a voice trembling with high emotion that "never, never, shall the enemies of my husband succeed in their evil designs". She left the palace a few days later. Perhaps she repaired to the house of her parents near Agra. One thing is certain: she eluded Qutb-ul-Mulk, spurning all his promises, presents and pleas.

Rafi-ud-Darjat was buried near the Qutb. His ninety-nine-day reign was a non-event in history save that it brought to light the perfidy of the Syeds. Some hired tears were shed at his passing away; seldom before had the obsequies of an emperor been so bereft of sorrow. The priest at the funeral, deviating somewhat from the traditional prayer, observed. "Let us permit nature to have its own way. The great Allah understands His business better than we do". Some people read in this remark perhaps more than what was intended. Two weeks afterwards, the priest was demoted in his ecclesiastic rank. Qutb-ul-Mulk certainly knew his business better than all others.

Rafi-ud-Darjat had a unique heritage in that his father and his mother were both grandchildren of Aurangzeb. His mother was the daughter of Prince Muhammad Akbar. It was, therefore, not surprising that in his person was evident, to some extent, the steel and quiet puritanism of Alamgir. Perhaps he would have made a greater mark as Emperor had his reign not come as a byproduct of the intrigues of the Syed brothers. The manner of his death was a measure of his helplessness. One of his last acts

*The middle son of Rafi-ush-Shan, Rafi-ud-Daula was eighteen months older than Rafi-ud-Darjat. It is not known why he was not selected to succeed Farrakh-Siyyar in the first instance.

was to wish Rafi-ud-Daula "a better luck than I have had the good fortune to enjoy". Perhaps he knew inwardly that his brother would sooner rather than later meet the same fate as he had succumbed to. A monarch with the shortest span of reign in Mughal history, Rafi-ud-Darjat was not short of intellectual integrity.

Rafi-ud-Daula

Chapter 12

FATAL KISSES

A young man of twenty-one, Rafi-ud-Daula ascended the throne on 6 June 1719. He knew full well the circumstances in which the crown imperial was placed on his head. The Syeds were the real rulers, and he a mere figurehead.

Following a simple coronation ceremonial, he was heard to recite a famous couplet of Maulana Rum, praising nature as his goddess and saying, "To thy law my services are bound". Hassan Ali, well-versed in the Persian lierature, heard the expressed thought, and remarked with a knowing grin on his wrinkled face, "Let Rum say what he will, the law of the land will have its full play". The purport of the repartee was not lost on any one. The laws of the land were under the control of Qutb-ul-Mulk.

Not to be outwitted in this first exchange of hidden hostility, the youthful Emperor turned to the Vizir and parried, with a faint smile in his eyes, with yet another Rum assertion that "never, never, does nature say one thing and wisdom another". Qutb-ul-Mulk made no reply. He bowed low, and left the throne-room groping in his mind, perhaps, for words to establish his intellectual superiority. The battle had begun. The opening round was lost by Qutb-ul-Mulk.

It is hard to find out whether Providence is a kind parent or a harsh stepmother to a man. In one way, Providence was kind to Rafi-ud-Daula in that he came to sit on a throne unexcelled in splendour in the East and the West. Looked at from another angle, no stepmother could have been more stepmotherly in imposing upon the inexperienced Rafi-ud-Daula the superhuman task of ruling without being the ruler. The odds were heavily against him right from the beginning. The Syed grip on the affairs of the Empire was firm. The posts of Governors in all provinces were held by men handpicked by Qutb-ul-Mulk. The court in the capital was dominated completely by members of the Syed clan. The palace itself

was under a virtual blockade by Hussain Ali's forces. The Emperor had to ask for permission before going out for hunt or even for a stroll in the garden. A network of spies kept a close watch over the movements of Rafi-ud-Daula and members of his harem. The vigil around the royal apartments was so tight as to make them virtually a prison.

Notwithstanding these restrictions on the freedom of the Emperor, the invocations to Allah were made daily in his name from the pulpits of all mosques in Delhi. Coins of various denominations were struck in the name of "Shah Jahan Sani, preserver of peace and protector of the faithful". The Darbar was held every Wednesday to enable the nobility "to bask in the sunshine of the Emperor's glory". In fact, the trappings of the court were kept in excellent shape. The court itself was, however, allowed to go into such decay as was fit only for the sight of slaves.

Rafi-ud-Daula clearly saw in this contradiction the components of an intrigue to seize the throne at an opportune time. There was no illusion in his mind about the intentions of Qutb-ul-Mulk and his brother. His sights were clear. Only he did not know how to bypass the dangers that lay ahead. Helplessness aggravated his misery. Many times he thought of abdication, but the lack of courage to give up something that nature had thrust into his lap was a failing that unnerved him. He decided in the end to let nature be the arbiter of his destiny. Any other course was full of hazards more threatening than he could cope with. He reckoned perhaps that time was on his side. Rafi-ud-Daula kept under his pillow a tablet on which was written, "Time and I against any two". He was an optimist whose perspective was shaped by his helplessness, not by courage and faith. This brand of optimism cannot but succumb under the force of circumstances. It is only the optimism of the brave which can conquer mountains and seas. In the manner of a scared pigeon, he chose to shut his eyes and felt secure.

A weak-willed man is like ivy which grows beautifully so long as it twines round a father-figure, but is of no use when it is separated. All his friends and relatives having either been detained or kept under constant surveillance, Rafi-ud-Daula quickly lost the confidence that he at first showed in his ability to somehow get the better of the Syeds. A minor revolt spearheaded by Shaista Khan, maternal uncle of Farrakh-Siyyar, convinced him that he had no supporters at the court. The others who joined in this sabre-rattling against the new regime were Raja Jai Singh, Salabat Khan, brother-in-law of Farrakh-Siyyar, Rahulla Khan and Jaffar Khan. The rebels, in fact, dispersed before they joined hands in a bid to avenge the liquidation of the house of Azim-ush-Shan. The Syeds, they

realized, were entrenched too strongly to be displaced by a mere show of arms. They lacked the much-needed unity of purpose. Moreover, Ajit Singh showed no intention to join in the planned coup. Qutb-ul-Mulk had bent over backwards to keep the Marwar ruler on his side. The Raja's daughter, widow of Farrakh-Siyyar, was permitted to repatriate to Jodhpur the revenues of her jagirs in Oudh and Malwa—a concession that ran against the conservative view that the one who renounced Islam after conversion to that religion was a super-apostate not worthy of any consideration at the hands of a Vizir pledged to protect Islamic laws and traditions. But to Qutb-ul-Mulk Islam meant nothing, fifty thousand fighting men everything. Had the Raja taken the plunge to side with the rebels, the Syeds could have been hard put to it to contain them. The rebellion fizzled out without a shot having been fired. Rafi-ud-Daula heaved a sigh of relief. The irony of fate was that he came to believe that in Abdullah Khan and Hussain Ali he possessed two fast friends! One may have strange bed-fellows in adversity.

Meanwhile, the revolt in Agra too was coming fast to a collapse. Hussain Ali was in full control of the situation. Both Mir Sen and Safvi Khan were ready to announce surrender any time. But strong men of the calibre of Amir-ul-Umra seldom break their own laws of treachery and callousness of the heart. An offer of pardon to Safvi Khan cleft the ranks of the garrison in two. The Khan swallowed the bait, and he opened the gates of the fort on 12 August 1719. The story of surrender has already been told in the previous chapter. What remains to be told is that the money-lust seized Hussain Ali, and he ransacked the vaults of the citadel for hidden wealth of the nine generations of Mughal Emperors. The hoards of wealth — in gold, silver and precious stones—that came in his possession surpassed calculations. Official historians put the value of the treasures at three hundred million rupees.

The reports of this haul could not but arouse the envy and anger of Qutb-ul-Mulk. Not to be denied a share in this booty, he left Delhi for Agra on 29 August. Rafi-ud-Daula accompanied him. Abdullah Khan could not take the risk of leaving the Emperor alone in the capital. The times were uncertain. The rebellion of Shaista Khan had not yet fully died down. He took suitable precautions against the malcontents raising their heads again in his absence. The whole of Delhi was converted into a fort. Nearly seventy thousand men were posted to guard the city on all sides.

In the meantime, Hussain Ali left Agra for Delhi with all his men and less than a fraction of his riches. The bulk of the treasures were sent by him to the Deccan for safe-keeping in the fort at Aurangabad. He met

Qutb-ul-Mulk midway between Delhi and Agra and, following a formal submission to the Emperor, proceeded to give account of the manner in which the rebellion was crushed. He also boasted about the methodical manner in which the hoarded riches in the fort had been checked and sealed in his presence. Qutb-ul-Mulk lost patience, and he cut his brother short, saying: "Hidden treasures are like a good woman. He who discovers them will do well not to boast about them. Come, let us have simple figures in simple words".

Hussain Ali was taken aback at the severity of his brother's tone. He understood the implication of the Vizir's remark, and proceeded to give details of the haul, not mentioning a word about the camel-loads that had been sent to the south. The resulting explanations and counter-questions developed into a fearsome feud of hard and threatening words. Apprehending a split that might become difficult to repair later, the much-trusted adviser of the Prime Minister, Raja Rattan Chand intervened to restore peace between the brothers. "It is best to take heed of a young wench and accusing words before they split a family", he pleaded.

The Emperor remained throughout a silent spectator. Heated arguments, of what complexion soever, left him cold. Once or twice he fidgeted in the unease of mind, but he made no attempt either to calm tempers or to show indignation by leaving the audience tent. But for the presence of the Emperor, wrote Khushal Chand, the two brothers might have come to blows. The softening words of Rattan Chand, however, relieved the tension somewhat. The fifty-fifty formula put across by him yielded results. Qutb-ul-Mulk agreed to be content for the time with half of the six million rupees Hussain Ali was carrying with him in steel chests. The treasures sent to Aurangabad were to be deposited in the imperial treasury pending proper check-up and joint scrutiny.

It was also agreed that the personal belongings of the former Emperors and queens were to be kept in the vaults of the fort in Delhi, and that they were not to be regarded as part of the booty to be shared by the Syeds or by any other members of the nobility. In utter humility and touching reverence for the past, Rafi-ud-Daula asked for two museum pieces that were reported to be among the items sent to Aurangabad—the sword of Alamgir and a shawl worn by Nur Jahan Begum at the time of her last visit to Kashmir. His request was considered too trivial to be turned down. He was, however, not fated to enjoy possessing these family heirlooms. His death shortly afterwards added a new dimension to the treachery the Syeds had come to symbolise.

While still in camp, Rafi-ud-Daula suffered a severe attack of belly-

pains, and he died all of a sudden on 18 September 1719. Massih-uz-Zaman Abdullah Khan was by his side when the end came. According to him, the cause of death was "irritation in the stomach caused by some outside agent". The efforts by him to relieve pain proved fruitless. Qutb-ul-Mulk rushed to the royal tent when he came to know of the Emperor having passed away. Hussain Ali came a couple of hours later to join a small group of mourners. From all accounts it appears that Rafi-ud-Daula had no wife, mistress or concubine to grieve over his demise. The body was taken to Delhi in a procession the next day. The burial took place before sunset the same evening. A modest grave was assigned to him close to the place at Qutb where Rafi-ud-Darjat was interned four and a half months earlier. Thus came to an end the progeny of Rafi-ush-Shan, third son of Bahadur Shah I*. Three lineal descendants of Aurangzeb disappeared from the scene in less than a year. A few were left to be disposed of by the Syeds before they could lay claim to found a new dynasty without hurting the susceptibilities of what remained of the Mughal and Rajput nobility.

Many contemporary historians and foreign travellers felt convinced that Rafi-ud-Daula, like Rafi-ud-Darjat, died of poisoning. The circumstantial evidence supports this conjecture. Over-ambition and an intriguing mind have for centuries been the parents of treachery in high places. Abdullah Khan was not only imbued with limitless ambition; he was ruthless, crafty and in possession of the armed wherewithal sufficient to change the course of history. Besides, in his younger brother, Hussain Ali, he had an ally more wily and heartless than he himself was. Together, they formed a team well cut-out for the perfidious tasks they felt impelled to engage themselves in. Like all maniacs, they believed in the correctness of their cause, as also in the support of Allah for the achievement of their goal. Their ego, their covetousness and their insatiable craving for material glory led them step by step to the path of criminal misdeeds unpardonable in the eyes of God and man. The favours shown to the royal physician Abdullah Khan first after the death of Rafi-ud-Darjat and again after Rafi-ud-Daula went to eternal sleep point clearly to his collusion with the Syeds in eliminating all those princes who could legitimately lay claim to the throne. In less than a year the *mansab* of Massih-uz-Zaman was raised in two stages from one thousand to four thousand. A magnificent mansion was allotted to him for residence near the house of Qutb-

*Rafi-ush-Shan's eldest son, Muhammad Ibrahim, was also raised to the throne by Syed Abdullah Khan following the assassination of Amir-ul-Umra Hussain Ali towards the end of 1720. His "reign" lasted only a few weeks. Azim-ush-Shan had no daughter.

ul-Mulk. His place at the court was advanced from the third to the front row of noblemen enjoying the privilege of access to the palace at any time of the day.

A maidservant in the royal apartment, Asghari Banu, also received uncommon rewards and increments of salary during this period. She was in charge of looking after the service of meals to the Emperor. No dish could be brought to the imperial *dastarkhan* unless she was satisfied that it had been given the clearance by official tasters.

Asghari was in attendance in the camp when Rafi-ud-Daula suffered intolerable pains in the belly. Shortly afterwards, she was sent to Aurangabad for service in the harem of Hussain Ali. From all acounts, she was pretty to sit by, pleasant to talk to and pleasant too to think about. Some members of the household were inclined to believe that Rafi-ud-Daula was emotionally committed to her. The guileful, sharp-eyed Syeds took advantage of that weakness, and they induced her to do what other women would not perhaps have succeeded in accomplishing. It is believed that Rafi-ud-Daula liked to kiss her looks whenever she was alone in his presence. The artful Asghari seldom came to him without first soaking her hair in a perfumed lotion prepared by Abdullah Khan. Every kiss meant for Rafi-ud-Daula an advance on the path of slow death. She never returned to Delhi from the south. What happened to her is not known either. The guilty Syeds perhaps effaced her in a bid to efface all evidence against them. They could trust a man to keep his mouth shut, not a woman. Whatever the cause of Rafi-ud-Daula's sudden death, the suspicion is unavoidable that the Syeds had a hand in it. With each Mughal prince removed from their way, the chances of their capturing the throne became brighter. Over-ambition is truly a monster with a heart of stone.

Official historians describe Rafi-ud-Daula as "an opium-addict, weak of mind and weaker still of body". Some foreign traders who happened to see him differed, however, in their characterisation of his personality. They agreed more or less with John Burke, a British traveller, that "the king was a good-looking young man, cheerful, though inclined to look at foreigners with a suspecting eye".

A majority of Mughal princes married fairly young. It is certainly strange that Rafi-ud-Daula died unwed at the age of twenty-one. That departure from the accepted general practice gives some credence to the official version that Rafi-ud-Daula was physically not very robust. Whatever the fact about his bodily condition, it is on record that he brought to bear considerable intelligence on his discussions with Qutb-

ul-Mulk and other counsellors. Like Rafi-ud-Darjat, he was alert and conscious of his privileges as Emperor. However, the reality of his being a creation of the Syeds sat sometimes heavily on his mind. Occasionally, he went through periods of depression during which he tended to be short-tempered, irascible, and prone to look at everybody as his enemy. These spasms of pessimism were, however, short-lived. Any eye-catching object, might it be a woman, a flower, a good-sounding phrase or a piece of art, would quickly restore his natural light-heartedness and the facility to exchange pleasantries with those in attendance. Though his movements were woefully restricted, yet that constraint did not extinguish the ebullience of spirit he was endowed with. It was perhaps this spark of freedom in his make-up that led Qutb-ul-Mulk to engineer his early death. Thieves dread even their own shadows. The Syeds had reached a stage in perfidy where to them every bush was a soldier and every corner a trap. Their misdeeds made them the prisoners of their doubts and fears. Their egotism, their infinite authority and their ever-gnawing awe of the law of retribution led them inexorably to acts of such criminal behaviour as could not but arouse mass anger against them. For the time, they rode the storm with firmness. However, the distant peals of thunder could not but cause alarm in their hearts. They chose outwardly to laugh out the blues as figments of their imagination. Inwardly perhaps their acts of folly kept them from sleep and rest. The guilty conscience is a fearsome ogre.

The 136-day reign of Rafi-ud-Daula, like that of his younger brother, was more an episode in the story of the Syeds than a part of the narrative of the fall of Mughals. The reign ended before it began, the mode of accession and the manner of his death being the only two talking points of his rule. The population neither expressed joy at his enthronement nor did it express grief at his passing away. The silent march of events left them guessing about the shape of things to come. Fear, not hope, filled the people's hearts. Never before in the previous two hundred years had uncertainty about the future been more oppressive. Not only was there a question mark over the future of the Mughal dynasty, but also over the future of Islam in Hindustan. Continuing political instability could not but span grave thoughts in the heads of the learned few; the untutored majority took refuge in rumours and bazaar gossip. The masses looked up skywards for help, and the more knowledgeable religious divines cast their glances to the north-west, across the Hindukush, for succour. The result was a bedlam of prayers, some meaningful and others, like most invocations to God, without any meaning.

The nobility, noble only in name, sat on the fence, reluctant to take rigid positions in the on-going factional skirmishes; it concentrated more or less on consolidating old friendships and making new ones in anticipation of a conflict to end conflict. For the first time, the rich and the poor felt vaguely that the Mughals were on the way out. Who would take their place ? One man's guess was as good as that of another. The odds on the Syeds were very long.

Muhammad Shah

Chapter 13

TRUST IN GOD-FORCE

TRAINED to cleave to the sunnier side of doubt, Abdullah Khan forgot for a few days that the body of a dead king was lying virtually unattended in the palace. To announce that Rafi-ud-Daula was no more was to pour fat on the fires smouldering all around. Instead, he chose to hide his crime by acts of deception aimed at preventing an explosion of public wrath. Proclamations in the name of the Emperor were issued daily to the local and provincial authorities. A duplicate of Rafi-ud-Daula appeared in the *jharokha* every morning. Noblemen came in and out of the palace, dressed in their formal robes, to underline normality. Abdullah Khan himself donned new robes of distinction, complete with new bejewelled daggers and new diamond-studded belts to emphasise the Emperor's continuing bestowal of high honours on him.

Meanwhile, yet another search was launched for a Timurid prince on whose head would fit the crown of Alamgir. The choice fell on the seventeen-year-old Roshan Akhtar, son of Jahan Shah, fourth son of Bahadur Shah I. It took four days to persuade the wailing ladies of the harem to permit the handsome youth to accept the invitation. To ascend the throne, it was generally believed, was to descend down the vale of destruction. The Syed plan was no secret. A new dynasty was to be founded when the entire brood of Mughal princes was out of the way. In stages, the overbearing Syeds had come to believe that, as kinsmen of the Prophet, they were entitled to any property they could get hold of. The highest law, they were convinced, gave a thing to him who could grab it. There was no power, in their calculation, but from the holy messenger of Allah. Their obsession with the right to give the people of Hindustan a new line of rulers seemed to have reached a point of no relentment. However, the laws of nature laughed at their innovations in self-deception.

With Roshan Akhtar waiting in the wings to be led to the throne by Qutb-ul-Mulk, an announcement was made by the beat of drum on 22 September that "following the sudden passing away of the benign Emperor, Shah Jahan Sani, the Great Lord has called upon the noble and illustrious Shahzada Roshan Akhtar, son of the heaven-residing Jahan Shah, to ascend the throne". The news stunned the population. Everyone felt, but none dare assert, that yet another Mughal king had fallen to the power-hunger of the Syeds. Men and women, of all ages and races, lamented the passing away of Rafi-ud-Daula. They also agreed with one another that it would not be long before Roshan Akhtar would go the same way as had gone the two sons of Rafi-ush-Shan. Some hot-heads could not resist giving vent to their anger by openly hinting at prayer-meetings that the sons of Abdullah Khan* were poised for the kill, and that the few remaining scions of the dynasty of Amir Timur would soon be rubbed out of existence. This anti-Syed chant gathered momentum, and many a nobleman wondered if a popular uprising was around the corner. However, the gathering clouds blew over as the Ali brothers were not panicked into hasty action against their detractors. To be able to endure odium is the first art to be learned by those aspiring for boundless power. Both Qutb-ul-Mulk and Amir-ul-Umra chose to lie low till the show of hostility against them subsided. Dissent breeds on suppression. The Syeds sent out no armed men to silence their critics. The result was calm and return to near-normality in a couple of days. The stage was thus set for the coronation of the Emperor-designate.

Caution is the train-carrier of fear. The Syeds, apprehending renewal of trouble, chose to install Roshan Akhtar as Emperor in the safety of the camp four miles from Delhi. The throne room in the palace was ruled out at the advice of one Shiv Narain, an astrologer in the household of Raja Rattan Chand. The new ruler, according to this comparatively young reader of the mysteries of the future, bore a fairly big-size mole on his left forearm — a signal from the planet Mars that his accession inside the fort could "give him the strength of Akbar Padshah and the faith of Alamgir". Hassan Ali verified personally the reality of the mole, and without further questioning ordered that arrangements for enthronement be made in the camp.

The sky was overcast, almost to the point of holding an umbrella of gloom over the camp and its neighbourhood, when an hour before the

*The name of the father of Hassan Ali and Hussain Ali was Abdullah Khan. The elder son, Hassan Ali, was given the title Abdullah Khan in recognition of his services.

mid-day prayer-time a gaily-dressed Qutb-ul-Mulk led Roshan Akhtar by the arm to ascend a replica of the marble throne at Agra. A team of priests, led by the most reverend Shaikh Amjad Ali Qasoori, chanted verses from the holy Quran to invoke the blessings of Allah upon the new monarch. The ceremony, which lasted for nearly half an hour, was simple, almost colourless from the beginning to the end. Qutb-ul-Mulk dominated the proceedings at every stage. As pointed out by Khushal Chand, it was clear the Vizir was intent on creating the impression that the young Emperor was his personal possession. "Perhaps Abdullah Khan was guided by a Persian proverb that 'those who possess the king possess the law' ", wrote the historian. Khushal Chand went on to record that Qutb-ul-Mulk, a scholar of Persian and Arabic, forgot perhaps another famous adage that "the power of a man is his capacity to do some real good". Whatever the motive, Abdullah Khan emerged from the throne tent a very strong man, resolved to convert the Empire into his exclusive property. The office of high Vizir was dear to him, but dearer still was the power that comes with unlimited money.

Roshan Akhtar became the twelfth Mughal Emperor in the title Abul Fateh Nasir-ud-Din Muhammad Shah Padshah Ghazi. In official records he was, however, slated as the "ninth descendant of Babar Padshah, successor of Muhammad Farrakh-Siyyar and the son of the brave-souled, generous Jahan Shah". The reigns of the two sons of Rafi-ush-Shan were thus written off as non-events—an admission of error in king-making that confused the nobility no less than it did the common man. According to Khafi Khan, this "recourse to suppression of recorded reality" was taken in deference to the wishes of Roshan Akhtar's mother; she insisted on her son being considered a rightful occupant of the throne, and not the creation of any faction. Neither reason nor reality was on her side. Yet the Syeds conceded her demand. To refuse was to risk dismay and intrigue in the palace right from the beginning.

Abdullah Khan did not relish the thought of circumstances compelling his involvement in yet another crisis in less than a year. The murmurs of general discontent with his conduct of the affairs of state had aroused him to the necessity of going slow with his long-range plans. Hassan Ali was no doubt a very ambitious man, but somewhere in his heart there lay hidden a spark of graciousness that commanded admiration. He was not a born ruthless adventurer. His main blemish was that he subordinated nearly all his human traits to the lust for power and material wealth. Kindly silence was a weapon that he often used with telling effect to disarm his opponents. This "noblest answer to any embarrassing argu-

ment", wrote Khafi Khan, "is the despair of his adversaries" Like all high-powered individuals, Hassan Ali was a man of many parts, some good, some bad. That the bad were in command most of the time was a corollary to his ceaseless chase after sensuous pleasures. A high-voltage hedonist, he could have become an equally strong-spirited saint had the circumstances warranted that course. He did not rule only by terror. Kindness was a ploy he often used to win friends and disarm his enemies.

Born on 26 August 1702, the seventeen-year-old Roshan Akhtar was handsome, intelligent, fairly well-read in the Persian and Hindustani lore, proud of his high lineage, and, what was perhaps more important, well aware of the hand of destiny in his rise to the throne. He seemed to know the virtues and vices of the Syeds brothers; hence his initial caution in questioning their decisions and priorities. For the time, he chose to swim with the tide, not doing or saying anything which might hurt either their ego or their material interests. Discrete vigilance was the means he adopted to save himself the fate that befell his two predecessors. Accordingly, he made no attempt to assert the rights of a sovereign and to affirm, either by the word of mouth or pen, that the affairs of Empire were under his command. Watchfulness, he realized, was the prime need of the hour. He often comforted his ever-fearful and ever-praying mother, Nawab Qudsiya, with the words: "As it rolls on, time will bestow what the Syeds dare not promise to give in answer to our prayers". Young in age, the new Emperor was certainly old in wisdom.

No new appointments were made either at the court or in the provinces in the beginning of the new regime. Proclamations about the change in occupancy of the throne were made in Delhi and provincial capitals without any mention of the policies intended to be followed by the new ruler. The personal armies maintained by Qutb-ul-Mulk and Amir-ul-Umra were strengthened both in men and equipment, the obvious inference being that no rebellion against their writ would be tolerated in any part of the kingdom. Security around the palace was further tightened. The Emperor was not expected to go out even on hunting expeditions without the permission of the high Vizir. The network of espionage at the court and in the harem was enlarged to preclude chances of secret intrigues by factions opposed to the Syeds. News-writers were instructed to keep a close watch on developments in their respective areas and to inform the Prime Minister by the hand of special couriers of any rebellious intent or movement. According to Khushal Chand, it became clear that the power that made men terrible became a terror first to its possessors; it made the Syeds frightened of their own shadows.

Abdullah Khan knew perhaps in the heart of hearts that the power which was boundless could never be stable. But he was in no mood to listen to the voice of sanity, and step down gradually from the ramparts of authority he had come to occupy. He roared, seldom whimpered, in the exercise of his power. The Syed ascendancy had reached a point from where it could ascend no further. To many an experienced observer, a fall became inevitable. Muhammad Shah was not wrong in his trust in time. The wait in the palace began on a note of hope.

The strategy of wait-and-watch was evolved principally by Nawab Qudsiya. Womanly instincts told her clearly that any other course would be suicidal. The Syeds were too strong to be confronted with force. She made no secret of her trust in Providence, as also of her belief that Roshan Akhtar was not called to the throne to serve as yet another stepping stone of the Syeds. "My son is indestructible. He has a big, shining mole on his left forearm. He is destined to be the despair of his enemies", she wrote in a secret letter to Nizam-ul-Mulk.

The Nawab Sahiba, as she came to be known in the palace, spent almost the whole of her privy purse — rupees fifteen hundred a month — on giving stipends to young scholars engaged in discovering the mysteries of nature. Her reputation as "a kindly queen-mother who looked beyond the frontiers of this perishable world" spread high and wide. The poor flocked in large numbers in front of her palace gate every morning in the hope of catching a glimpse of "the angel that applies a soothing balm to the wounds of the indigent". Often the smiling Nawab would come out, wrapped as it were in touching humility, to distribute garments and food to the young poor with her own hand. The crowds raised their hands skyward in prayers as she mingled with them, inquiring about their problems and sources of income.

One winter morning when an old woman, clothed in tatters, accosted the Nawab with praise to Allah and praise to the dynasty of Akbar Padshah, she halted, handed over to the grey-haired lady a pair of cotton shirts, and then prepared to acknowledge the greetings of others. "This gift is fine, O' gracious mother of the Emperor, but it will not assuage my hunger. No food has gone down my throat for many days. My husband died many years ago. My only son is without work. Sorrow is our constant companion, and Allah our refuge. Come to our house if you wish to have a close look at the anatomies of poverty and want. There are many like me. Help us. Allah will help you and your son", said the old woman in such plaintive voice as brought tears to the eyes of the queen-mother. Without a halting thought, the Nawab handed over to her the gold

necklace she was wearing, saying: "This should meet your needs for some time. Ask your son to see me at the same place, the same day next week. God will provide for him". The Nawab kept the date. The old lady's son rose to the position of a junior male-bearer in five years. Her concern for the poor was not an artifice; it was a soulful appeal to God to help her son demolish the plans of the Syeds. Charity was her mode of prayer. Her invocations did not go in vain.

A good-natured mother marks a good-natured son. Muhammad Shah bowed to the wishes of the Nawab in that he refrained from asserting his will in matters that the Syeds considered to be their exclusive concern; he bided his time within the four walls of the royal apartment; he began to show increasing interest in religion, philosophy and languages; he went to the palace mosque regularly to offer the prescribed five prayers a day; he kept at the arm's length the noblemen known to be opposed to the Syeds; he showed exceptional deference to Qutb-ul-Mulk at audience time; he gave high awards to friends and members of the Syed clan—in fact, to all outward appearances he identified himself with the Syed preferences in all walks of life, as also in administration. Like a rabbit, the Emperor seemed to fondle his own handsome face, forgetting for a while that the hounds were chasing him. Both the Nawab and her son played their self-allotted rolls so well that the Syeds relaxed their vigil somewhat, permitting the Emperor occasionally to indulge his hobbies and to go where he pleased in search of harmless pleasures. The wait began to yield results. The woman in the Nawab was too shrewd to be beaten by the arrogant materialist in Hassan Ali.

Echoes of the revolt of Niku-Siyyar were still heard in northern India. The Syeds could not forget that some non-Muslim factions, in particular the Rajputs and Jats, had thrown in their moral and material weight on the side of the insurrectionists. The influential Nizam-ul-Mulk was also at one stage ready to jump into the fray in support of the rebels. Both he and Raja Jai Singh had advanced to within striking distance of Agra before they decided to hold back their punches till the result of Hussain Ali's hurried advance to Agra became clearer. That in the end they chose to keep away from an unequal fight showed not where lay their loyalties, but where rested their self-interest. That they were hostile to the Syeds was a fact too glaring to be ignored. Their containment, if not their destruction, was considered essential for the achievement of what the Syeds aimed at. To that end, a fairly large and well-equipped force was raised under generals hand-picked by the commander-in-chief, Amir-ul-Umra Hussain Ali. The nominal overall command of the campaign was

offered to the Emperor. The latter saw in the expedition a God-sent opportunity to win friends and consolidate his position as Emperor.

The far-sighted Nawab Qudsiya expressed a wish to accompany her son on his first military expedition. The elder Syed agreed to the request in the belief that her presence in the royal entourage would serve as a beneficial influence on the young monarch's conduct of the campaign. Qutb-ul-Mulk had come to admire the queen-mother for what he called "the qualities of a mind rooted in the values of the spirit". She joined Muhammad Shah at Fatehpur Sikri whither he had proceeded to seek the blessings of Shaikh Salim Chishti. The offerings she made at the holy shrine were estimated to be of the value of rupees fifty thousand—a large sum considering her meagre inheritance and a comparatively small privy purse. For two days she played the host to the city's poor, her munificence drawing plaudits from the old and the young, the wealthy and the indigent, the faithful and those who followed religions other than Islam.

Muhammad Shah too basked in the glory of her mother. The Imam at the Dargah paid him a rich tribute for what he called "the glistening show of devotion, sincerity and submission to the will of the Lord". The Emperor's four-day stay in the hallowed township was marked by a number of touching excursions to places associated with the lives of emperors Akbar and Jahangir. The one that evoked unmixed praise was his visit to the tiny cottage, near the humble dwelling of the Chishti, where Mariam Zamani Jodha Bai gave birth to Prince Salim one hundred fifty years ago. Muhammad Shah, overpowered by the weight of history, stood spellbound in the small redstone room, his eyes fixed on the marble chair on which Akbar was supposed to have sat when he came there to have the first look at the child of his many prayers. Nawab Qudsiya was with him on this occasion. She read her son's thoughts, and remarked on leaving: "It is indeed a great privilege and a great responsibility to be the scion of a dynasty that has few equals in the world for glamour, achievement and high ideals. May Allah make you worthy of your great heritage".

Muhammad Shah did not speak a word. Silence could not have been more expressive of his thoughts. The son of Jahan Shah had lived a unique moment of history. The lives of Akbar and Jodha Bai reminded him that love transcended religion and that kingship, in its highest form, was an art in creating unity out of multiplicity. Kafi Khan described the visit as "one of those events that chasten and inspire, educate and hold the mirror to a splendorous past".

The report of the Emperor's four-day stopover at Sikri sent to Delhi

by the news-writer Abdul Majid Khan pleased Qutb-ul-Mulk no end. The visionary Muhammad Shah, he reckoned, would be more amenable to his will than any votary of the goddess of wealth. The Syed was wrong in his arithmetic. The mystics and seers are pure oak when compared to the soft pulp of which are made the men that worship money. Though Muhammad Shah was no sage, in any sense of that word, yet his trust at the time in God-force lifted him above the seekers after pleasures that money could buy. In quest for stability, the friendless Emperor could find no more dependable companion than faith in his own destiny. His mother helped him gain confidence in his stars. The Syeds were gradually coming to the end of their days of good fortune.

Self-confidence is at once the consequence and basis of faith. The transformation that came upon Muhammad Shah after having trodden the sacred soil of Sikri astounded his mother and members of the entourage. In quick-time he became a supremo in name and in reality. At the daily meetings with commanders, he gave orders following full-length debates on the pros and cons of a problem; he accepted no opinion without sifting its merits, and expressed none unless he was convinced of its advantages. When a letter came from Delhi suggesting the desirability of the Emperor proceeding to Ajmer in battle array, Muhammad Shah questioned the advisability of the planned move "when there is no enemy in sight". He agreed only when informed that Raja Jai Singh was reported to be positioning himself for a link-up with the Jat chief, Chabela Ram, with the aim of escalating yet another revolt against the Syed-dominated Empire. The objective of the march, he was told, was to overawe the Rajput ruler with the might of the Mughal army, and to compel him to accept "reasonable terms" for an accord with the Emperor.

Muhammad Shah consulted his mother, and he came to the conclusion that the Raja could be won over to his side more easily by suave diplomacy than by a display of armed strength. Accordingly, he ordered a march to Ajmer not in battle formations but in the style of Akbar Padshah proceeding to the holy city for pilgrimage. Raja Ajit Singh, who not long ago had married a daughter of the Amber ruler, welcomed the line of approach suggested by Muhammad Shah, and he made haste to offer his services as a mediator. The plan yielded results before the Mughals reached Ajmer. After a second meeting with Jai Singh "somewhere in the vicinity of Jaipur", Ajit Singh came to the royal camp with the news that his son-in-law was prepared to shed hostility to the Syeds on condition that he was paid rupees four million as compensation for the losses suffered over the last one year. In addition, he demanded the

cession of parts of Gujarat to Amber as a price for his support to Mughals against the Jats and other insurrectionists in Oudh.

In consultation with Amir-ul-Umra Hussain Ali, who had joined the camp a couple of days earlier, Muhammad Shah accepted the terms of a treaty of friendship. A communication was sent to Qutb-ul-Mulk, informing him of the success of the diplomatic approach, and at the same time telling him of his intention to proceed to Ajmer for "bowing my head in thankfulness at the shrine of the most revered Khwaja Mueen-ud-Din Chisti". Muhammad Shah was now the real ruler of Hindustan, and Qutb-ul-Mulk his Prime Minister. The equation between the two had undergone a significant change. No more was Muhammad Shah a mere rubber-stamp for the policies of Abdullah Khan; he himself was the policy-maker.

The Emperor returned to Agra in December, 1719, amidst reports that a gallant, young Jat leader, Girdhar Bahadur*, was in full control of the Government of Allahabad, and that he had prepared himself for a long fight if the Mughals chose to use force to oust him from the famed citadel. With blood and revenge hammering in their heads, the Syeds sought the permission of the Emperor for launching an all-out assault on Allahabad and bring "the arrogant, treacherous Jat to his knees". Muhammad Shah agreed, not because he wanted to defuse the Jats, but because the moment was not considered opportune to risk a rift with the Syed junta still in power. The command of the planned expeditionary force was given to no other than Haidar Quli Khan.

Offers of bribes and promises of high honours at the court failed to unhinge Bahadur from his resolve not to surrender what, in his reckoning, belonged to him by the right of inheritance. In a desperate last bid to break the Jat's determination, Qutb-ul-Mulk offered him the province of Oudh in lieu of the fort, but Bahadur did not deflect from the course he had set before him. He was pledged to God to remain where he was — in the citadel of his ancestors. Hereafter, Bahadur refused even to receive any envoy from the Syeds on the plea that religious tradition prevented him from entering into formal negotiations within a year of his uncle's

*Girdhar Bahadur was the son of Daya Ram, brother of Chabela Ram. He was in detention at Delhi following the deposition of Farrakh-Siyyar. The latter had secretly helped the Jats in their efforts to oust the Syeds from their positions of dominance at the court. Chabela Ram died of a paralytic attack in November, 1719. Hussain Ali saw in his passing away an opportunity to demolish the Jat strongholds by force. Girdhar Bahadur came to know of the Syeds' plans, and he staged a daring escape from detention with the help of two maidservants. He reached Allahabad in December, and shut himself up in the fort.

death. "The period of mourning is a period of prayer and meditation", he told Syed Bisharat Ali who sought an interview as a representative of the court.

Meanwhile, Bahadur strengthened the defences of the fort in respect of manpower, gunfire and also in respect of stocks of foodgrains. "Our stocks of ammunition and food will last for a hundred years", he boasted when a counsellor referred to the difficulty of obtaining food supplies when the Mughal blockade was tightened. An underground channel, dug within a short span of six months, linked the Ganga with the Jamuna—a safety ploy to facilitate inundation in an emergency. In a short letter to his cousin, Ram Dayal, wrote Bahadur: "We owe it to our benefactor, Azim-ush-Shan, that the killers of his son (Farrakh-Siyyar) should be made to pay for their brutal acts of injustice. Revenge is just. Even the great Lord Brahma avenges and is furious. There can be no compromise with sin. My conscience is clear. It is better to avenge a benefactor than to mourn him. We owe our present strength and status to the big-hearted munificence of Azim-ush-Shan and his valiant son, Farrakh-Siyyar".

The diplomatic offensive having failed, orders were given to Haidar Quli Khan to march to Allahabad and use such means as were considered necessary to deflate the swollen head of that gangster Girdhar Bahadur". The hard-hearted Haidar, in a leave-taking ceremony, drew his sword and threw away the scabbard — a symbolic pledge to the Emperor that he would not rest content till the task entrusted to him was successfully completed. Hussain Ali girded around the steel-chested commander's waist a bejewelled dagger, saying in a high-pitched voice:

Rebellion is as the sin of witchraft. It is only the evil men who take up arms against the king. There are many types of rebellion — rebellion of the belly, rebellion of over-ambition, rebellion of patriotism, rebellion of vengeance, and rebellion of religion. There is some good in all of them. But the one resorted to by the hot-headed Jat desperado, Girdhar, has in it no virtue, only evil. To crush him will be obedience to God. The Emperor commands you to capture Allahabad and to bring the rebel to his august presence bound in chains of steel. No mercy must be shown to one who nourishes evil intentions towards the Emperor, the Empire and towards all those who are upholding the banner of true faith and righteousness. May Allah give you the strength and valour to rub out the *bete noire* that is Girdhar from the face of the Empire. Good luck. The Prophet will protect you.

Muhammad Shah gave a half-smile, as only kings know how to give, to mark his approval of the words spoken by Amir-ul-Umra. Haidar did the prescribed three salutations, and left with a show of rare determination in his eyes, his face, his every limb. What happened next can be described best in the words of Khafi Khan:

Haidar's army, comprising ten thousand men, with proportionate divisions of cavalry, artillery and the elephant corps, spread devastation wherever it passed through. The peasantry groaned under its nailed footwear. Stocks of foodgrains were destroyed for the sake of destruction only. Villages were set on fire for no sin other than that they were populated predominantly by the Jat community. Some Jat chiefs offered resistance, only to be overpowered and cut to pieces by a militia riding high on the strength of their arms and number. The Bundela leader, Bhagwant Singh, defied the logic of guns and elephants to put up a heroic fight when the imperial army were hardly twelve miles from Allahabad. With arrows stuck in his face and in his chest, he alighted from his horse and, roaring defiance in the name of Lord Mahadev, he cut with his sword the heads of nearly two dozen Mughal soldiers before he could be overpowered. When nailed down, he kissed the "mother earth" at which point his soul departed, God only knows for what region of the upper world. According to Bundelas, it found a place in the highest mansion of the paradise. On the other hand, Haidar Quli Khan and his men were firm in their assertions that it went straight to the darkest chamber of hell. The Jat resistance increased further as the imperialists reached the precincts of Allahabad. The carnage continued for many weeks, but there came no indication from Girdhar Bahadur of his intention to lay down arms. A desperate attempt by Haidar to scale the ramparts of the fort in a midnight assault was foiled by a division of Jats led by a cousin of Bahadur. Allahabad and its neighbouring territories bore the appearance of a graveyard when Haidar realized that his force was not sufficient to pulverise the defences of the citadel. Girdhar stood dauntless. He seemed to be ready for a war of hundred years. The Mughals chose to pitch their camp a few miles outside Allahabad. An urgent request for reinforcements was sent to Qutb-ul-Mulk. The ensuing stalemate was virtually a defeat for the Mughals.

The duties and obligations of all those who are lazy and pleasure-seekers fall upon those who are willing to work and shoulder responsibilities. Qutb-ul-Mulk spent his nights, as also his days, for the most part amidst

the gaiety of his large harem. Sensuous pleasure made a shambles of his physical and mental health. The burden of governance fell, therefore, on the shoulders of his more purposive, more energetic younger brother, Hussain Ali. The call for reinforcements by Haidar Quli Khan thus came to be considered by him, not in his capacity as commander-in-chief but in his role as the *de facto* Prime Minister in the continual absence of Qutb-ul-Mulk from the court. This arrangement suited Muhammad Shah. He preferred to deal with a matter-of-fact soldier than with a self-centred statesman of little will-power and less courage of convictions. The Emperor accepted the recommendation of Hussain Ali that reinforcements should be rushed to Allahabad under his (Hussain Ali's) command.

When the chief counsellor of Qutb-ul-Mulk, Raja Rattan Chand, came to know of this decision, his scheming head read in this move a hidden design of Amir-ul-Umra to appropriate to himself the hoarded riches of Allahabad. Qutb-ul-Mulk was discretely apprised of this apprehension, and it was suggested by the Raja that in no circumstances should Hussain Ali be permitted to head the forces to be sent for providing assistance to Haidar Quli Beg. "The commander chosen for the job should be junior to Haidar, not his senior in rank and status", he insisted. Hassan Ali, a man of infinite self-interest, accepted the cogency of the Raja's argument, and he took immediate steps to prevail upon the Emperor to rescind the proclamation appointing Hussain Ali to the emergency post.

This development could not but cause a deep rift between the brothers, an outcome that pleased inwardly both the Emperor and the ever-opportunistic Rattan Chand. Following days of open and behind-the-scenes recriminations the Syed brothers accepted a compromise formula put forth by the Raja: Neither Hassan Ali nor Hussain Ali should proceed to Allahabad; instead, the Raja should be given a chance to use his powers of persuasion to convince Girdhar Bahadur that peace, not conflict, held the key to his independence.

Four valuable months passed by before the mediation plan was finally approved. Rattan Chand and his team of advisers left for Allahabad in the first week of April, 1720. Military reinforcements preceded him under the command of a relatively junior soldier of the Syed clan.

At first, Girdhar Bahadur declined to receive Rattan Chand on the ground that the one-year period of mourning was not yet over. The Raja offered to meet him "informally without aides, without bodyguard and without fanfare". He wrote to the Jat chief:

The principal objective of my visit to the citadel is to condole the passing away of your much-admired uncle. I will come in my personal capacity, not in the capacity of an envoy of the Mughals. The Hindu religious tradition is as sacrosanct to me as it is to you. From our shared sorrow there may emerge a bond of friendship that may in time show the path to peace and mutual respect. There is no deceit in my heart. Our gods look down upon treachery as the foulest sin. Did not Lord Rama say: 'Kill a man's family and he may brook it, but you will use the evil intent to deceive him at your own peril.' In nature, deception is the vilest act of theft. I am prepared to entrust my life and my reputation to your care. There is nothing that I ask for in return except your goodwill and understanding. There will be nobody but God between you and me. Pray, let me do what is incumbent on me as an elder brother. Sorrow has no barriers; neither is patriotism divisible. It is irrelevant that at this point of time I happen to be in the service of the Mughal Emperor, and you in the service of your conscience and self-esteem. We are knit together by the ideals and values of a deathless religion. What we have in common is far more fundamental than what divides us. I am confident that our meeting will yield good results; it can beget no harm. Any hour of the day or night will suit me. I shall eagerly await your response.

This was a good letter, both in thought and in words. References to "common ideals and common religious values" touched the most sensitive part of Bahadur's anatomy. He shed the lurking doubts and fears, and sent to Rattan Chand an invitation, written in his own hand, to do honour to the soul of my uncle an hour after sunset on 1 May". Rattan Chand was delighted at the success of his approach. The appointment was confirmed by the hand of the courier who brought the invitation.

The astute, artful Rattan Chand went to the fort at the appointed hour dressed in saffron clothes and wearing a black-bordered jacket, to highlight the purpose of his mission. Received at the gate by a senior fort commander, the Raja was led to the audience room in silence that seemed to thicken with every step. Girdhar Bahadur rose to welcome him as the Raja entered a sparsely furnished room. What followed is the familiar tale of a cordial embrace, expressions on either side of grief at the passing away of "Maharaj Chabela Ram", exchange of turban, citations of Vedic words to underline the mysteries of life and death, inquiries about the well-being of families, and other traditional trivialities connected with meetings of condolence. Not a word was said on either side about matters that dominated the minds of the two leaders.

When after a few suspenseful minutes there entered by the side-door the wife of Bahadur to perform the age-old ritual of placing a vermillion mark on the forehead of "brother Raja Rattan Chand", the room came to life, as it were, and the pervading gloom lifted somewhat amidst a ceremonial that broke the barriers of differences in allegiance and outlook. The vermillion has been a virtual talisman in Indian history for creating lasting family friendships and frameworks of permanent peace. The doubts and suspicions on either side vanished quickly as a maidservant brought on a gold tray the usual knick-knacks, including a glassful of the Ganges water, for the Maharani to do the symbolic act of honouring a partner-in-grief. In the solemnity of the brief sacrament, the feigned sorrow gave place to a feeling of oneness and fellowship.

Thereafter, the Maharani, a picture of serenity, invited her husband and the newly-acquired "brother" to join in a prayer at the feet of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati. She led them to a room in the east wing of the fort where stood the gold images of the divine couple in the soothing glow of lamps lit in all four corners of the all-marble chamber. She stopped in front of the family deity and sang in low notes a prayer in praise of "the Creator, controller of destinies, harbinger of climes in which flowers bloom, birds chirp, and sorrows fly away in the emptiness of space". Then she touched the jewel-studded feet of the heavenly couple, and raised the thus sanctified hands to her forehead—an act of submission to the supreme being that, it is believed, gives courage to faint hearts, replaces hatred with love, and gives enlightenment to those yearning for knowledge and peace. Then she stepped aside, and gestured to her companions to follow her example. First Girdhar Bahadur and then Rattan Chand did the prescribed exercise with the aplomb and fervour of ardent devotees. In the end, she did the *aarti* to the slow chanting of hymns as old as the Himalayas. The ceremonial was over. Girdhar and Rattan Chand walked backwards, step by a deferential step, and went out by the door they came in. The Maharani lingered back for some time, and she went to her apartment after thanking the Lord in traditional song for "giving this insignificant creature yet another opportunity to bask for a while in thine divine glow".

Before Rattan Chand prepared to take leave, he invited Girdhar Bahadur "to do me the great honour of visiting our camp at your convenience any day". The Jat chief said a grateful yes without a halting thought. There was no fear in his heart, only an indefinable earnestness for peace and unity. To pray together is the surest way to come closer. Rattan Chand's mission was a success. He had achieved what looked

beyond the capacity of Haidar Quli Khan to attain. The fort seemed to be well within his grasp.

The very next day, Girdhar Bahadur went to the Mughal camp outside Allahabad. He took some presents with him. The Raja received him with unbounded courtesy, and offered him many a precious gift—ranging from magnificent elephants to delicate art work—as tokens of his high regard and esteem. Bahadur accepted only a tusker with words of gratitude and, as was customary, returned the rest, saying: "I am overwhelmed by your gestures of goodwill. May our friendship remain firm to our mutual benefit." Rattan Chand held the burly Jat in a long embrace, and he made no secret of his joy at the outcome of his initiative.

After the exchange of presents and courtesies, the two met for a while in a red-and-blue tent without aides. They decided to hold formal discussions the next day (3 May) "to work out a mutually acceptable settlement of the irritants that have for some years come in the way of tranquillity in Oudh".

Held in a garden, close to the fort and declared to be neutral ground, the meeting could not but produce results satisfactory to both sides. Girdhar Bahadur agreed to vacate the fort when Rattan Chand offered him (1) the whole of Oudh with the right of succession, (2) the prerogative of appointing civil and military officials, (3) a sum of rupees three million in compensation for losses during the last one year, (4) a diamond-studded royal turban, and (5) robes of purple along with the royal sceptre and dagger. A formal treaty was signed by Rattan Chand on behalf of the Emperor. No mention was made in the document of Qutb-ul-Mulk either by name or by designation. Girdhar Bahadur made it clear from the beginning that he would enter into an agreement with the Emperor, not with any of the Syeds. Rattan Chand kept this stipulation a secret, not disclosing it even to his patron till Haidar Quli Khan, who was opposed to the terms of the accord, divulged it to the Prime Minister on reaching Agra three months later. The Raja justified his acceptance of Girdhar's condition on grounds of strategy. "I wanted to possess the fort at any cost", he explained to Hassan Ali, and added: "The route from Bengal is now under our control. Let Girdhar satisfy his pride with the sceptre and purple robes. I calculate the accord in terms of hard cash. After all, I am a *bania* by birth. To secure the fort was my mission. How I did it was of little consequence".

Qutb-ul-Mulk stroked his beard, gave a smile of understanding, and he asked his counsellor no further question. Rattan Chand never lost control of his wits. That was the main reason for Qutb-ul-Mulk's total

trust in him. "Others waver and wilt. The Raja is always straight and steadfast. He has no equal in bargaining from a position of weakness", he told Amir-ul-Umra when the latter supported Haidar in denouncing the treaty as a near-defeat for the imperial forces. Haidar and Hussain were soldiers; they were not traders trained in the business of buying and selling.

On 11 May 1720, Girdhar Bahadur left the fort with all his wealth and all members of the family. The garrison gave him a sad, silent farewell. A chapter in the history of the Jats thus came to an end. The command of the citadel was entrusted to a non-Syed, Ahmad Khan, brother of the celebrated Muhammad Khan Bangesh. A week later, Rattan Chand left for the capital where high honours awaited him. The Emperor received him in audience on the very day of his arrival, raised his *mansab* to five thousand, honoured him with rare robes of honour and a pearl necklace of fabulous value believed to have been worn by Emperor Jahangir at the time of his last visit to Kashmir in 1626. The Raja was a hero. He was regarded differently by different people. To Muhammad Shah he bore the image of a friend who had saved the riches of Allahabad from falling in the hands of the Syeds. Hassan Ali admired him for the manner in which he ousted Bahadur from the fort, and Hussain Ali lauded him for the mediatory role he played in preventing a rift developing in the ranks of the Syeds. Rattan Chand was aware of the multi-image personality that he had, willy-nilly, come to acquire. He needed to tread the ground with extra wariness in future. One false step, he realized, could land him in infinite trouble. However, his reliance on his wits remained undiminished.

Chapter 14

THE SYED SUN DESCENDS

AFTER the collapse of Jat opposition to their dominance, the Syeds set about demolishing the Turani faction which, in the guise of neutrality, had come very near to siding with the enemies of Qutb-ul-Mulk and his brother. The most powerful nobleman of this party, Nizam-ul-Mulk*, had held out promises of support to Raja Jai Singh, Neku-Siyyar and Chabela Ram in that order since the deposition and execution of Farrakh-Siyyar, but for reasons not difficult to guess he did at no time actually take the field against the ruling party. A man of many parts, Nizam-ul-Mulk was at once a loyalist, a dissenter, an idealist and an opportunist with material ambitions, as high as the sky. The plain truth is that whatever the circumstances, his first fidelity was to himself, everyone else came afterwards.

Following the death of Bahadur Shah both he and his father virtually sat on the fence, taking no part in the war of succession that brought Jahandar Shah to the throne. His fortune rose and fell like the waves of an angry sea till Farrakh-Siyyar became the Emperor in 1713. Thereafter, high honours and prestigious posts of Governor came his way — a development that could not but arouse the jealousy and hostility of the Syeds. Here was the beginning of the discord that stretched unto the reign

*The grandfather of Nizam-ul-Mulk migrated to Hindustan from Bokhara in 1655. His son, Adil Shaikh, entered the court of Aurangzeb, rendered meritorious services in the Deccan, and died fighting in the siege of Golcanda in 1687. Alamgir gave him the title Qitch Khan. Of his five sons, the eldest, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan, Firoz Jang, was the most distinguished and capable soldier of all Turanis. He was blind in both eyes for the last twenty years of his life. Qamar-ud-Din, his son by the daughter of Sadullah Khan, Prime Minister of Shah Jahan, was born on 11 August 1671. It was in 1690 that he received the title Chin Qitch Khan. A few years later he received the title Khan-i-Dauran. Towards the end of Farrakh-Siyyar's reign he became Ghazi-ud-Din Khan Bahadur, Firoz Jang. Later, he first became Khan-i-Khanan and then Nizam-ul-Mulk, Fateh Jang.

of Muhammad Shah and which turned out, in the end, to be the chiefest factor that led to the downfall of the Syeds. Nizam-ul-Mulk was a firm administrator, an imaginative soldier and a rare-vintage diplomatist well-versed in the art of making falsehood look like gospel truth. He was not a patriot, neither was he a rebel, in the normal meaning of those words. He hated the Syeds, yet he was not an admirer of their enemies. He looked upon Muhammad Shah and his predecessors as a possible means of shunting out the Syeds, not as Emperors worthy of unconditional respect and loyalty.

Qutb-ul-Mulk feared Nizam-ul-Mulk more than anybody else. In 1714, Syed Hussain Ali was appointed Viceroy of the Deccan in his place, a change that revealed fairly clearly the intention of the Prime Minister to cut the wings of the Turani party. Instead, Nizam-ul-Mulk was offered the much junior post of Governor of Malwa. He accepted the new assignment after considerable thought and consultations with his supporters both in and outside the court. It was better, he reckoned, to rule in Ujjain than to be a mere scene-shifter in Agra. The presence in Malwa of nearly fifty thousand Maharatta mercenary soldiers was a reality that could make or mar the fortunes of any Mughal Governor. Nizam-ul-Mulk was an optimist, full of confidence in his ability not only to tame these fire-eating fighting men, but also to use them in an emergency to cut the Syeds to size. His acceptance of the post was a carefully calculated decision, meant primarily to strengthen his military position and, secondly, to be out of the instant reach of his enemies. He left for Ujjain with all his riches and all his near relatives early in 1716, not leaving behind either a possible hostage or a hoard of wealth for confiscation. He made his intentions as clear as had done the Syeds. Farrakh-Siyyar watched these moves with intelligent interest. He was at the moment not in a position to take sides. However, his hopes of winning independence from the Syeds rested on Nizam-ul-Mulk. Hassan Ali, however, turned out to be more than his match in duplicity, and deposed him before he could get rid of him.

The sequence of dramatic events leading to the enthronement of Muhammad Shah lent force to the general belief that the Syeds were planning to raise a new dynasty on the ashes of the remaining Mughal princes. Nizam-ul-Mulk was too shrewd an observer of the goings-on at the court to misread the real meaning of the passing away of Rafi-ud-Darjat and Rafi-ud-Dauia in less than a year. Determined not to be taken by surprise, he embarked on a massive plan of recruitment to his army, engaged European experts to handle long and medium-range guns, spent

huge sums of money for purchasing from whatever source available the latest types of arms and ammunition. He also made secret overtures to the captains of Maharatta warriors for evolving an accord of friendship and mutual assistance.

The official news-writers reported these developments to Agra, and the result was an explosion of anger in the Syed camp against Nizam-ul-Mulk. The latter's agent at the court was summoned, and Hussain Ali, red in the face, shook before him the relevant intelligence reports, called the Khan a Turani snake, and asked him in the sternest words he could muster to convey to his master that the commander-in-chief knew the way to trample underfoot all those who harboured rebellious intentions. Instantly, orders were issued under the imperial seal for immediate recall of the Governor to the capital. The topmost general of the imperial army, Dilawar Ali Khan, was asked to be ready to march to Malwa at short notice.

Qutb-ul-Mulk informed the Emperor of the decision to invade Malwa in case Nizam-ul-Mulk showed reluctance to obey the royal command. Muhammad Shah had no alternative but to laud the decision as a step in the right direction. That he hoped inwardly for an open revolt by Nizam-ul-Mulk is a story of hope amidst hopelessness. A letter written by the Emperor's mother, Nawab Qudsiya, to Nizam-ul-Mulk reflects clearly the unenviable plight of the Emperor and his family. She wrote:

It is learnt that orders have been issued under my son's seal for your recall to the capital. The proclamation might have borne the imperial seal, but it did not bear the approval of the Emperor. As you are perhaps aware, we are prisoners in the hands of the Syeds. We dare not do or say anything without their permission. Our hopes of freedom rest on you and your supporters. A rebellion now and then is a sound medicine for the health of the Empire. If you come to Agra, it is almost certain that you will find a berth in the fort at Gwalior or in some more dismal place. Resist the Vizir, and you may find yourself a place of honour in the history of the Mughals. Our eyes are fixed on you. The resources of the Empire will be at your disposal if you manage somehow to defeat the Syeds in a conflict that may be forced upon you. May Allah help you in a war of righteousness against suppression.

This communication was sent to Ujjain by the hand of a maidservant, Dilgudaz, who travelled upto Allahabad as a concubine in the entourage of a trader from Bokhara. The black-eyed messenger, acting on instruc-

tions from the queen-mother, left no womanly art of allurement unused to win the trust of the merchant, and thus to enter the privacy of his small harem as "one accomplished in Hindustani dance and music". On reaching Allahabad, she asked the unsuspecting trader for permission to visit her sister who was married to the high priest of the city. Dilgudaz never returned to resume the merchant's march to Hooghly. Her brother-in-law, a man of influence and substantial monetary resources, managed to forward the highly incriminating communication to Ujjain with the help of a junior commander of the fort.

Nizam-ul-Mulk was not surprised at the fears and hopes expressed by Nawab Qudsiya, but he was taken aback at the reckless desperation of the queen-mother in sending the communication to him in the manner she did. He sent for the fair messenger, rewarded her suitably for the risks she took in undertaking the hazardous mission, and in due time invited her to join his service as lady-in-waiting to his senior spouse. Dilgudaz returned to Agra some time later when Nizam-ul-Mulk became the high Vizir. Muhammad Shah gave her the title "black-eyed angel", and he bestowed on her a jagir worth rupees fifty thousand a year. Her marriage to a *mansabdar* of two thousand, Dost Abul Ansari, was arranged and attended by the queen-mother herself. The presents she gave her former maidservant included a replica of the diamond tiara she wore at the time of her wedding two decades earlier. Loyalty invariably won rich rewards from the Mughal kings and queens.

A pragmatist that he was, Nizam-ul-Mulk knew full well that the only justification of rebellion was success. To that end, he formulated his plans with utmost care, taking into account the armed might of the Syeds, their money-power, their influence in north Hindustan, their network of agents and spies throughout the Empire, as also their weaknesses and positions of vulnerability. His conclusion was that to come into armed conflict with them in the north was to court disaster and, secondly, that every ploy should be used, before raising the flag of rebellion, to lull them into believing that loyalty to the Empire, as also to the Syeds, was dear to his heart. With that twin-objective, he addressed a letter to Qutb-ul-Mulk which became important not for what it said but for what it left unsaid. He wrote:

The contents and tone of the communication addressed to me by Amir-ul-Umra made it amply clear that my loyalty is in doubt. In my veins runs the blood of Ghazi-ud-Din Muhammad Khan who stood by the Empire through thick and thin with his life. To harbour infidelity is for me a sign

of decay and death. The record of my service is without blemish, and that despite many a tempting opportunity that the devil threw in my way for digression from the path of devotion. At one time the rebels in Agra called me. I spurned their overtures, and did whatever I could to dissuade them from the path of disobedience. To suspect my *bona fides* because of tendentious reports sent by some ignorant news-writers is to call white black because of colour blindness. My faith is firm and my conscience crystal clear. It is true that I have added to the strength of the army at my disposal. That step was taken to defend the Empire, not to oppose it. The presence in Malwa of fifty thousand Maharatta troops left me no alternative. They are the sworn enemies of the Mughals. The Emperor did not send me to Ujjain to let Malwa fall into the lap of the descendants of Shivaji. The recruitment drive launched by me was a necessity that could be ignored only at the peril of our safety and honour. The Turani in me is ever watchful and vigilant. Woe befall the foe who casts an evil eye on our territories and our integrity. Allah is the witness to the truth of my statement. I invite you to come to Ujjain and probe the allegations against me yourself. My late father taught me two things: one, to serve the king, if need be, with life and, two, to fear nobody but God. His words of wisdom have sustained me in all circumstances. I would, in the end, request you to reconsider the matter, and let me continue to serve in the post that I am occupying at present. My transfer from here will be a comfort to the enemies of our Empire and our faith.

Hassan Ali was inclined to accept as true the affirmations of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Hussain Ali, on the other hand, dubbed the letter as a "bundle of blatant lies". He insisted on Nizam-ul-Mulk's recall without further delay. Qutb-ul-Mulk, in the end, gave in to his brother's strongly expressed views. A repetition of the royal order was sent to Ujjain.

The fifty-year old Nizam-ul-Mulk geared up his courage to face the challenge. He had no intention to be caught in the trap laid by the Syeds. He went into consultation with his chief adviser, Ghiyas Muhammad Khan, and together they worked out a strategy based on courage, honour and self-reliance—a motto that ultimately came to be inscribed on the banners of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Repeated warnings by his cousin, Muhammad Amin Khan, against the Syeds' plottings to destroy the Turani party once and for all convinced Nizam-ul-Mulk of the necessity to make Deccan the base for his operations. He knew the south well and, what was more, he had many friends there who would be only too glad to have an opportunity to take up arms against the Syeds. The memories of the high-

handed injustices committed by Hussain Ali during the term of his Viceroyalty were still fresh in the minds of the Maharattas and the lesser-known tribal communities. In revenge they looked not as much to the pains and fears of the past, but to the pleasures and plenty to follow. Already, Nizam-ul-Mulk was in contact with their leaders in Malwa, and he had good reasons to believe that their support could be enlisted without much effort. They were mercenaries all, and to cater to their money-lust, Nizam-ul-Mulk had enough bags of gold and silver in his chests. He remembered well a Turkish saying that women and professional warriors did most delight in revenge. Who could sleep in safety who had done them wrong? He was convinced that those who idolised the House of Shivaji could do more for revenge than what they would do for the Dharma. Also, he knew that the revenge of a fanatic was without mercy. The Maharattas, he told Ghiyas Muhammad Khan, were not only religious fanatics, but also fanatics in their hatred of the foreign rule. To exploit this weakness of his would-be allies was the task he bent over backwards to perform. Ghiyas supported his strategy and also his optimism. They decided to disobey the royal command, and to leave the rest to Providence. The die was cast. Nizam-ul-Mulk was on the warpath.

The resolutions that suffer themselves to be discussed over and over again are but moderate; they do not bear the imprint of irreversibility. Neither Nizam-ul-Mulk nor Ghiyas Muhammad Khan reopened the decision taken. They were men of like passions, like ideas and like reactions to challenging situations. They worked night and day to prepare their men for the hazards that lay ahead. Money was distributed liberally to forge new friendships and consolidate the old ones. However, they did not spell out to anyone what they were planning to do and how. The only thing that was known was that the Governor had been summoned to Agra and that he was, for reasons best known to him, hesitant to obey the command.

When orders were given in the last week of April for a march westward on the road to the capital, the belief gained ground that Nizam-ul-Mulk had relented and that he was prepared to seek his fortune in obedience. The end of uncertainty was the beginning of low-key rejoicings in the camp. For six days they jogged along merrily to the drum tunes of peace and religious upliftment. When a red-hot sun arose at Daroha on the seventh day, the scene underwent a dramatic change. The soldiers awoke to the strains of martial music played at various points of the wide, sprawling camp. The junior commanders relayed by the beat of drum the

orders of the supremo to turn and start the march eastwards before the mid-day call for prayers.

This was not a retreat, but a carefully planned feint meant primarily to tell the Syeds that if Nizam-ul-Mulk travelled hundreds of rough miles to the west it was more to reveal his strength than to profess his weakness. His purpose having been served, he was heading for the Deccan in defiance of the wishes of the Syeds. Here was a proclamation of rebellion, in action not in words.

The news of the round-about-turn stunned Agra. The Syeds quarrelled among themselves in despair and disillusionment. The impetuous Hussain Ali wanted to send a large army in hot pursuit and take every possible step to prevent the Turani take over of Aurangabad. Abdullah Khan, on the other hand, counselled restraint on the plea that the imperial forces in the south were large enough to defeat the plans of Nizam-ul-Mulk. A show of panic, he contended, might snowball into consequences difficult to predict.

"Let him take the dreary south if he can. We wage a war of attrition from the north", he told his haughty brother. The latter would, however, not hear a word of this argument which, he asserted, was "rooted in defeatism, cowardice and lack of faith".

The many sides of the crisis were discussed afresh in the presence of the Emperor who was wise enough not to give a clue to where his sympathies lay. Hussain Ali's unguided bravado was for the most part mere madness. And the act of calculated calmness put up by Abdullah Khan was no more than a ploy to forestall the rise of his ambitious younger brother to supreme military power. Muhammad Shah, young in years but fairly mature in the power of thought, watched this shadow-wrestling with well-concealed amusement. He expressed no positive opinion, and was content with making smileless half nods of approval and dissent in turn. Both Qutb-ul-Mulk and Amir-ul-Umra left the audience hall in the conviction that the Emperor upheld his argument—a performance by Muhammad Shah that could be the envy of many a more experienced monarch.

Nawab Qudsiya was inwardly jubilant at the rift that had developed in the ranks of the Syeds. Her hopes of liberation rose high. A divided enemy, she thought, was almost as good as defeated. The fear of her son coming to the fate that befell his two predecessors was for the time allayed. In its place arose the hope of a long reign in freedom and peace. She prayed soulfully for the success of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Her faith in the stars that governed the destiny of her son took a new hopeful turn when

a Brahmin astronomer, Pandit Shankar Dass, forecast "happier times for the House of Alamgir", and advised the queen-mother to "propitiate the planet Capricorn by feeding the poor every Tuesday with her own hands till such time as the planet moved out of its present orbit and came under the influence of the ever-merciful Mars". The happy queen-mother instituted free kitchens at eight main crossroads of the city, and for the next six months did exactly what she was told by the foreteller to do. She met the expenses from her own meagre privy purse. Women are generally more superstitious than men; they are also more generous when their own interests are at stake. Nawab Qudsiya was a sensitive person, well alive to the dominance of nature over the affairs of man.

Nizam-ul-Mulk was clever both on and off the battlefield, and he made no scruple of declaring it. Once the march to the Deccan got underway, he laid before the captains the entire gamut of his strategy. Capture of the Mughal Deccan was his ultimate objective. As a means to the achievement of that goal, it was vital that the fort of Asirgarh, which virtually stood guard at the gate of the southern peninsula, came in his possession before the Mughal commanders in the south could intervene and retard his progress. Ghiyas agreed with the broad outline of the plan, but he expressed the view that to capture the citadel by assault was a task beyond the capacity of their ten thousand men. A long siege, he said, was the only way to force the garrison to lay down arms, and that ploy in the circumstances, he warned, would be an invitation to the Syeds to attack them from the east and also from the west. Nizam-ul-Mulk accepted the cogency of Ghiyas's argument, and decided there and then to achieve by money-power what could not be attained by the power of the gun.

A faithful junior officer, Khusrau, offered his services for carrying bribery to the garrison through a friend, Usman Khan Qadir, who happened at the time to be the principal adviser to the fort commander, the eighty-year-old Abu Talib Khan. The offer was accepted, and Khusrau was sent to the fort as an envoy with a formal communication from Nizam-ul-Mulk. What happened next on 20 May 1720, showed clearly that Captain Gold and Captain Silver were superior in strength in medieval India to Captain Courage and Captain Stout Heart. On that fateful day, the gates of the famed castle were flung open to enable a small force led by the eldest son of Nizam-ul-Mulk, Ghazi-ud-Din Khan, Feroz Jang*, to enter and receive the keys from the shaking hands of the

*It was customary among the Turani noblemen, as also among the Syeds, to give the eldest son the name and title of his grandfather. Nizam-ul-Mulk's father bore the name Ghazi-ud-Din Khan, Feroz Jang.

octogenarian commander. Asirgarh had fallen, and thereby rose sky high the hopes of the rebel Turani leader. The seven-day operation bribery, it was estimated, cost Nizam-ul-Mulk eleven chests of steel packed to capacity with precious metals and the more precious stones. Khusrau was given the title "Hidden Sword" and a Jagir of the value of rupees fifty thousand a year in his native Oudh. The veteran Abu Talib Khan, though taken a prisoner, was treated with kindness. He died a year later.

The news of the surrender of Asirgarh was a hammer-blow to the prestige of the Syed brothers, as it was a whiff of fresh air to Nawab Qudsiya and her son. All the courses of the life of Nizam-ul-Mulk showed unmistakably that he was not in the roll of common rebels. He was fighting for a cause, not for wealth. Qutb-ul-Mulk had reason enough to look upon the latest setback with a degree of apprehension. Hussain Ali, on the other hand, became reckless and ordered Dilawar Ali Khan, without consulting his elder brother, to go ahead full speed in chase of the rebel force. At the same time, the twenty-year-old Governor of Aurangabad, Amin Ali Khan*, was ordered to leave nothing undone to prevent Nizam-ul-Mulk from scoring any further success in the south. The stakes, he calculated, were too high to be trifled with. A Turani-Maharatta alliance, he told Qutb-ul-Mulk, would be a dagger drawn at the heart of the Empire. The Vizir concurred, and he informed the Emperor of the steps taken to meet the threat. Muhammad Shah dallied with the golden chain he was wearing around his neck and, smiling faintly, put the information by; he expressed no view and asked no question. However, the proverb flashed through his head: "The many fall, one succeeds". Later in the day, he shared his fear with his mother. The latter made the famous remark: "If God is the dispenser of victories, why would He not give it to Nizam-ul-Mulk ? Let us keep faith and be firm in our hope".

The capture of Asirgarh gave Nizam-ul-Mulk a new hope, a new vision, and a new dimension in faith. It dawned on him for the first time that the unseen brigades of Providence were on his side. Uplifted by this new surge of self-confidence, he marched to Burhanpur as fast as he could, laid siege to the city, and sent a strongly-worded ultimatum to his once junior commander, Anwar Khan, threatening an all-out assault if the fort was not surrendered within forty-eight hours. Anwar Khan panicked, and asked for terms. Back came the reply: "The price of surrender is best left to our generosity. You are aware that frugality is not one of the failings of Nizam-ul-Mulk". Relying on the word of his former

*Amin Ali Khan was a nephew of Hussain Ali.

master, Anwar Khan raised the white flag and invited the rebel commander, Ghiyas Muhammad, to receive the keys before noon the next day. The formality of surrender was gone through at the appointed hour. The officers and men of the garrison were granted amnesty, and rewarded liberally for their undertaking to serve the Nizam faithfully. Anwar Khan was received at the camp Darbar with honour, and he was given the option either to proceed to Agra with all his family members or to join the rebel army in a rank consistent with his status. The sixty-year-old commander preferred to go home provided a suitable escort was given for his protection *en route*. Nizam-ul-Mulk respected his wish. Anwar Khan left for Agra on 14 June 1720.

Shortly after the fall of Burhanpur, there happened to pass through the city Begum Nifasat Banu, mother of Syed Saif-ud-Din Ali Khan, younger half-brother of Qutb-ul-Mulk. She panicked at finding the city under the control of rebel troops. When brought to his presence, Nizam-ul-Mulk gave her the traditional respect due to a senior Syed lady, assured her of full protection, and made suitable arrangements for her stay in Burhanpur till conditions for resumption of journey to the north became normal. Meanwhile, a special messenger was sent to Agra with a letter to Qutb-ul-Mulk from the Begum that all was well, and that Nizam-ul-Mulk had given her "the respect due to a sister from her younger brother". The letter concluded: "I hope to resume the journey to Agra within about a fortnight. Adequate arrangements have been made for my safety on the way. The Chin is not our enemy. He is a friend worthy of honour".

Perhaps this letter was written under compulsions not difficult to understand. The fact remains, however, that she travelled to Agra within ten days with an escort of two hundred fifty well-armed men. These men returned to Burhanpur after the Begum crossed the Narbada. She carried with her gifts given by Nizam-ul-Mulk of the value of nearly rupees ten thousand. Nizam-ul-Mulk was indeed a high-minded man who cared more for Oriental cultural values than for the narrow considerations of spite and vengefulness. "Chivalry is the beginning of every good thing, both at court and on the battlefield", he told his son.

The youthful Amin Ali Khan made hectic preparations at Aurangabad to stem the tide of Nizam-ul-Mulk's advance. He raised an army of nearly twenty thousand horse, and did whatever he could to inject in them a crusading spirit by high-sounding invocations in the name of the Prophet. "To fight for the descendants of the Muhammad (on whom be peace!) is the most certain way to assure a place of honour in the highest mansion

of heaven", he declared in a proclamation to his army when the news came that Nizam-ul-Mulk was heading towards Aurangabad after securing the territories around Burhanpur. His references to a "holy war" did heighten to some extent the morale of the new recruits, but the hard core of the army, comprising nearly a thousand experienced soldiers, doubted the ability of the untrained men to withstand the fury of Nizam-ul-Mulk's well-oiled war machinery. Their fears, some expressed and some left unexpressed, did not, however, dampen in any way the enthusiasm of Amin Ali Khan. He was resolved to make his first military adventure a success. The knowledge that Dilawar Ali Khan had crossed the Narbada at the head of an army of eighteen thousand further strengthened his optimism. It would be beyond the capacity of Nizam-ul-Mulk, he told his commanders, to save himself from the jaws of death that were closing in on him from two sides. Youth is reckless; it discounts the experience of old age.

In taking revenge, a man is but even with his enemy; in passing it over, he becomes his superior. Nizam-ul-Mulk believed that to be generous to an enemy was the best revenge. In that conviction, he wrote a letter to Dilawar Ali Khan, stressing the advantages of amity and asking him in the name of the Empire and the common religious values to desist from aggression, and to come to terms with him for evolving a mutually beneficial formula for settlement of the issues in dispute. The Khan laughed out this overture as "the scheming of a sick mind', and sent to him a reply that was as arrogant as it was offensive in words and tone. He wrote, in parts:

I am under orders to give a hammer-blow to the revolt you have chosen to spearhead. It is no use giving me a sermon on peace, love and brotherhood. The best proof of your claim to be a man of peace will be for you to come to my presence with a white scarf around your neck. I shall in that case recommend to the Emperor that your acts of disobedience may be forgiven. Heed my words: The day of doom for you and your supporters is near. Neglect to listen to this warning will only mean that the vultures of the south will have a sumptuous meal on the flesh of your soldiers' bodies. Also, I would like to stress that your alliance with the worshippers of the devil that was Shivaji is a perfidy too abominable to merit mercy. You have by that one act assured for yourself a place in the darkest chamber of hell. The holy book says it is never too late to repent. Come to me crawling on your legs and arms, and leave the rest to the will of the Almighty. This is the only advice I can give you at this time. You

will ignore it at your eternal peril.

Born soldiers never wear the white scarf till their passions die and their ambitions become extinct. Nizam-ul-Mulk set this communication alight in the presence of the envoy, and he asked him to tell his master that "hot words reveal only the palour of his heart", and added: "The Khan apparently wrote that letter under the influence of intoxicating beverages, being a slave of passions that are aroused by the devil of dementing drinks, he is incapable of making the right use either of his tongue or of his pen. He will soon perish in the fire of his madness. I will not throw out his body for the wolves to feast upon. Instead, I will have it dressed properly for burial at Aurangabad. This is my word of honour. Those who call themselves noblemen should not have an ignoble end. The sword will be the arbiter of his fate. Go, and tell him that I shall take him on first. The child Amin Ali will be dealt with later. It is my rue to chastise egoism first and ignorance afterwards".

True to his word, Nizam-ul-Mulk, resolute and dauntless, changed his plans and proceeded fast to engage Dilawar Ali Khan's twenty thousand men which included some crack divisions of Rajputs under Raja Bhim Singh of Bundi and Rao Gaj Singh of Jodhpur. The two armies came to grips on 19 June 1720, at a ravine nearly forty miles from Burhanpur. The imperial army was virtually caught on the wrong foot as it would have preferred a wider, more open terrain for the battle. A master of surprise tactics, Nizam-ul-Mulk not only baffled the enemy with his speed and wheeling movements, he also created endless puzzles for the imperial commanders in that there appeared on the battlefield a hundred Nizam-ul-Mulks seated on similarly caparisoned elephants with similar mahouts and howdahs.

The Marhatta divisions in the rebel army added to the confusion with their reckless onslaughts from the right and the left, and thus forcing Dilawar Ali Khan to advance from the centre and risk a hand-to-hand fight with the battle-hungry divisions under Ghiyas Muhammad. Two of the leading Syed commanders, Sher Khan and Babar Khan, were killed in the first wave of the enemy attack — a near-disaster that could not but disspirit the hard-pressed imperialists and force them into grave errors of action and judgment. The biggest blunder of all was the sudden appearance of Dilawar Ali Khan himself on the back of a tusker carrying the Syed insignia. Desperation showed in his face as he yelled out for Nizam-ul-Mulk "to come out of disguise and fight like a man". Within seconds, a spray of bullets shattered nearly every bone of his chest. Dilawar Ali

Khan was dead before his bodyguard had a chance to come to his rescue. A roar went up: "The villain is fallen, and never again shall he arise". The leaderless army lost heart and staged a retreat as ignominious as it was disorderly. The two Rajput chiefs, Bhim Singh and Gaj Singh, fell while making an abortive attempt to rally their men for a belated rearguard action.

The pursuing Maharatta soldiers cut down hundreds of fleeing imperial troops before Nizam-ul-Mulk called a halt and ordered a thanksgiving prayer at the spot where his elephant stood at the time of Dilawar Ali Khan's fall. Later, he had a marble arch constructed at the same spot in commemoration of "the victory that sealed the fate of the Syeds".

Victory does expel thoughts of revenge from the heart of the victor. Nizam-ul-Mulk kept his promise to the fallen foe. The body of Dilawar Ali Khan was prepared for burial and sent to Aurangabad for internment with honour near the tomb of a saint. Two of his wives were allotted a stately mansion for residence for the duration of their stay in the Deccan. The stipends paid to them were liberal, and the steps taken to ensure their protection well in keeping with their status. Defeated enemies were dear to Nizam-ul-Mulk than he to himself.

For Nizam-ul-Mulk the victory heralded what may be called the new Year's eve of time. There was joy in his heart, and his soul expanded with a feeling of self-fulfilment. His dream had come true. The Deccan was in his possession. With Dilawar Ali Khan out of the way, the inexperienced Amin Ali would entertain little hope of halting his march to sovereignty in the south. What was more, the victory spread infinite disarray in the Syed camp. Once again Abdullah Khan and his tempestuous brother, Hussain Ali, differed violently over the steps needed to be taken to contain Nizam-ul-Mulk. The fact that the family of Hussain Ali — three wives, five daughters and two sons — was in Aurangabad ruled out the feasibility of a hard, uncompromising stand against the victor.

The realistic Dianat Khan suggested that the best course in the circumstances was first to assign the six provinces of the Deccan to Nizam-ul-Mulk, and then to ask him to send to Agra under proper escort the family of Hussain Ali, as also his adopted son, Amin Ali Khan. There was consensus that Nizam-ul-Mulk could possibly be tamed with deft, friendly approaches, and that there was no reasonable chance of overpowering him with force. After long, heated debates in the presence of the Emperor, it was decided to accept the advice given by Dianat Khan, and to do whatever was possible to assure the safe return to Agra of the family members of Amir-ul-Umra. To that end, a proclamation, bearing

the royal seal, was issued, bestowing upon Nizam-ul-Mulk all the six *subas* of the south and charging him with full responsibility for maintaining law and order in the peninsula. The proclamation, a copy of which was sent to Nizam-ul-Mulk by the hand of a nephew of Abdullah Khan, ended thus:

His Majesty has faith in the ability of the Viceroy-designate not only to restore peace in the peninsula, but also to enhance the prestige of the house of Alamgir in territories held by the Maharattas and traders from across the seas. The Emperor further desires that speedy steps should be taken by his representative to repatriate to Agra under proper escort the families of Qutb-ul-Mulk and Amir-ul-Umra who are at present in Aurangabad. His Majesty wishes to record his high appreciation of the services hitherto rendered by Nizam-ul-Mulk to the Empire.

Hypocrisy deceives nobody, not even the person who plays the hypocrite. The Syeds doubted if Nizam-ul-Mulk would be taken in by the royal proclamation and do the obedient act of repatriating the stranded families to Agra. Though they had swallowed some part of their long-nurtured egoism, yet there remained enough pride in their heads not to admit defeat. In a further effort to lull Nizam-ul-Mulk to complacency, Hussain Ali wrote to him a letter which to this day remains the tallest and the most brazen lie ever told by one nobleman to another. He said, in parts:

Dearest brother, please accept my congratulations for exposing the mischievous and the unfaithful to the eyes of the world. You have truly saved the Empire from collapse and disintegration. Everyone in Agra, from the Emperor downwards, rejoices at the success of your arms. God be praised for His mercy. The Emperor, acting on the advice of Qutb-ul-Mulk, has already issued a proclamation entrusting all the six Mughal territories in the south to your care. A better choice for the post of Viceroy of Deccan could not have been made. Your long administrative experience and your astute skill in diplomacy will, it is felt, help the Empire attain new heights of glory. We are all proud of your achievements, and we look forward to the dawn of a new era of Mughal glory in the Deccan.

I have instructed my family members at Aurangabad to seek your protection and to request you for such help as they may require in the event of their deciding to travel to the north. It is some years since I left them in Aurangabad. That they should now like to join me in Agra is understandable. May God protect you for long years to consolidate and

enhance the authority of the Empire.

In speaking well of Nizam-ul-Mulk in superlative terms, the commander-in-chief apparently overplayed his hand. The rebel chief was too shrewd a soldier to mistake rank flattery for genuine praise. The proclamation, as also the letter, could not but put him on the alert and harden his resolve to carry the revolt to its logical conclusion. The Syed yoke around the neck of the Emperor had to be removed whatever the cost. His ever-watchful cousin, Muhammad Amin* had kept him informed of the intrigues and plottings of Abdullah Khan and Hussain Ali. The mother of Muhammad Shah, Nawab Qudsiya, forewarned Nizam-ul-Mulk about the real intentions of the Ali brothers and she had told him in plain words that the so-called royal proclamation was only a means to gain time, nothing more. "Plans are already afoot to mount a big-size invasion of the south. Be on your guard. I would that you will not believe even a word of what they say. My son agrees with my assessment", she wrote.

These and many other such warnings confirmed Nizam-ul-Mulk's belief that the words of Hussain Ali were at variance with his intentions. Muhammad Ghiyas, who had a genius for sorting out truth from the chaff of lies and deceptions, urged Nizam-ul-Mulk to demolish Alim Ali Khan before the Syeds arrived on the scene with a large army. This counsel was in consonance with the views of the rebel supremo. Their aim was the same, but the means chosen by Nizam-ul-Mulk to gain his objective were different. A master of the feint that he was, he addressed a letter to Qutb-ul-Mulk, expressing his gratitude for the honour done to him by the Emperor, and added:

The safety of the family of Amir-ul-Umra was the principal motive of my hurried departure from Ujjain. The Maharatta guerillas were on the rampage. They looted properties, dishonoured women, ransacked mosques and holy places, set villages on fire — in fact, they seemed to have arisen in a body to challenge Mughal authority. Alim Ali Khan was helpless against the gangs of Maharatta desperados. I had no alternative but to proceed to Burhanpur as fast as I could. Loyalty to the Emperor, not rebellion, was the motive that aroused me to action. God be praised that peace has been restored in territories under our jurisdiction. My efforts to convince Dilawar Ali Khan of my unswerving devotion to the throne

*Muhammad Amin was the leader of the Mughal faction at court. The Syeds made many attempts to liquidate him, but in vain. The Mughal soldiery was, by and large, loyal to him. The Emperor and his mother valued his support.

failed. He hurled abuse at me, and paid the price for his ignoble behaviour with life. Already I have taken steps to protect the honour and wealth of the members of the family of Syed Hussain Ali. They will be sent to Agra under heavy guard whenever they wish to leave Aurangabad. Their honour is mine, and their safety my principal concern. You and your brother need have no fear on their account.

I have been wanting for some years to proceed to Mecca for pilgrimage. But for His Majesty's latest proclamation, appointing me the Viceroy of Deccan, I would have by now left for the holy city. The call of the Emperor is to me more compelling than the call of the Prophet. I shall wait for another opportunity to satisfy my religious cravings.

In the end, let me assure you, Mr. Prime Minister, and also His Majesty the Emperor, of my undying loyalty to the Empire.

This letter, as full of deceit as was the one sent to him by Hussain Ali, was sent to Agra by a relay team of twelve speediest horses in the camp. The underlying purpose, like that of Hussain Ali, was to gain time. Simultaneously, he had the royal proclamation read many times a day from the pulpits of all principal mosques in the Deccan, and he also sent a communication to Alim Ali, asking him to present himself before the new Viceroy within seven days. Similar letters were sent to the Mughal commanders and deputy Governors in all six provinces. Nizam-ul-Mulk held a couple of Darbars, with all the frills and feathers of royalty, to underline his having taken over the administration of the Mughal Deccan. He was not one of those who would not exploit to the maximum a tactical blunder by his adversaries. The agents of Nizam-ul-Mulk never stopped blowing the trumpet of the new Viceroy's loyalty to the crown. Normally, when the age is in, the wit is out, but in the case of Nizam-ul-Mulk the years seemed to have sharpened his intelligence. He never forgot that he was at war, and that in war one must be speedy.

On the other side, Alim Ali made hectic preparations, in obedience to secret instructions from his foster-father, Hussain Ali, to dislodge Nizam-ul-Mulk from the position of advantage he had come to occupy. Through the tireless efforts of his young wife, Mariam, niece of Daud Khan, he managed to collect around him nearly twenty thousand men with many divisions of artillery manned by European gunners. Daud Khan too joined him with all his retainers and material resources. Vast sums of money were spent on bringing to his side the Maharatta troops which, at one time, were in the armed camp of Hussain Ali. The youthful Mariam, riding a white horse in male attire, inspected this fairly high-powered

force once or twice a week, gave sermons on the virtues of loyalty and courage, drew pictures of the heaven in store for the brave of heart, distributed the gifts of gold and silver to the commanders, and she promised liberal rewards of money to all "in the event of Allah crowning our efforts with success against a wily foe".

The morale of Alim Ali's army ran high for as long as it was not known that the Emperor had appointed Nizam-ul-Mulk as the Viceroy of Deccan. Thereafter, dissensions raised their fearsome head, and the number of men who deserted everyday took alarming proportions. Alim Ali became restive, and he decided to engage the enemy without delay. The fear of war, he realised, was worse than war itself. He moved out on the back of a splendorous elephant with a fanfare reminiscent of Alamgir's marches against the Sultanates. The shouts of "Ya Ali, Allah-o-Akbar" rent the air as the mammoth force made its way in battle formation to block Nizam-ul-Mulk's return to Burhanpur. The latter, acting as the Viceroy of Deccan, sent out high-level envoys to dissuade the young Syed from the path of confrontation, but to no avail.

When he realized that Alim Ali was in no mood either to surrender or make a compromise, Nizam-ul-Mulk shed all pretence of friendship with Abdullah Khan, grouped his twelve thousand men in the traditional right, left and centre formation, and the trumpets were sounded for a move forward from its entrenched position. The two armies came to grips near mid-day on 9 August 1720. The initial fighting was very heavy, almost savage in its fierceness. The freewheeling Alim Ali, intent on winning the battle off his own sword, was here, there and everywhere, urging his men "to send the enemy to the fires of hell", and calling upon the mahout to take him to the place where the enemy looked to have gained the upper hand. This recklessness could not but end in disaster. His elephant was riddled with bullets and arrows, and when the heroic animal could take it no longer, it swung backwards and fled. Alim Ali, bleeding profusely, kept on discharging arrows from his bow till the elephant got stuck in mud, and he alighted, in the tradition of the great soldiers of the Orient, to carry on his "crusade against treachery" from the ground. The inevitable came to pass not long afterwards. His head was cut off by a mighty sword-blow from Ithas Khan.

A brave young man, Alim Ali, through excess of bravery, gave his life as if on a platter to his foe. The death is but life in coffin. Men like Alim Ali live for ever. History salutes his heroism, as it regrets his decision to align himself behind the forces of reaction. The Syeds should have done well to recognise that intrigues, like hate, are the surest way to court self-

destruction. The Syed sun had begun to descend.

As was invariably the case in Oriental wars, the death of the leader meant a disorderly retreat for the imperial army. The jubilant rebel force fell upon it like hungry tigers, killing all those whose horses were not speedy enough to carry them out of the harm's way in time. Nearly ten thousand men lay dead and dying on the field before the sun set on a blistering, gruesome day. Nizam-ul-Mulk's victory was decisive. Mariam, who rode an elephant independently at the rear of the right wing, was found roaming, as if in a trance, amidst heaps of corpses well after darkness descended and gave her the look of a ghost in search of his lost soul. Nizam-ul-Mulk treated her with touching kindness when she was brought to his presence by a party of soldiers deputed to search for a nephew of the supremo among the fallen. She did not seem to know what had exactly happened, and she was heard raving incoherently about love and divine will in soft, almost musical, notes. Agony of the soul roughed up the beauty of her looks, and her bewildering, tight-lipped silence intrigued Nizam-ul-Mulk and his counsellors. Orders were given for her protection till she was restored to her parents or to the next of kin. But she was one of those rare persons who could command the angel of death to take her in its possession in case life became unbearable. On the seventh day of her detention, she asked for a *sitar*, an instrument she played with exquisite charm and skill. A few minutes after she began to run her fingers over the strings, she just faded away, like a swan, in music. Death left no mark on her fair, young, face. There she lay in all the glory of her love, loyalty and duty to her husband. Mariams never die. They live for ever, representing the quintessence of Indian womanhood. They laugh at the helplessness of death to do more than what it can do. Nizam-ul-Mulk rose to the occasion in the highest tradition of Indian chivalry. He attended her burial, and rained flowers on her body as it was lowered in the grave. This silver lining to the story of Alim Ali's defeat has been captured in song by many a bard of the north and south India. "Hindustan lives on the heroic deeds of her sons and daughters"—this was the burden of a twelve-couplet poem, headed Mariam, by an unknown poet.

Chapter 15

VIRTUELESS VIRTUES

THE news of Alim Ali's defeat and death reached Agra on 26 August 1720. The gloom that descended upon the Syed camp was such as could not be patched even by aphorisms. The ugly reality of an ignominious defeat shook their faith in fortune as also in themselves. The highly abstract enunciations about victory and defeat, life and death, and the will of God could not either bring Alim Ali to life or blunt the edge of Nizam-ul-Mulk's arms. The latter was now in full control of the resources of the Mughal Deccan, and the rest of the Empire did not possess the unity and will-power to extinguish the blaze of Nizam-ul-Mulk's rebellion. The odds were now heavily against the Syeds' ability to reassert their authority.

Muhammad Shah and his mother kept a low profile in this crisis. Outwardly they feigned sorrow, but inwardly their hearts were full of joy and hope. The powerful Muhammad Amin sympathised with the Syeds, and at the same time sent to Nizam-ul-Mulk secret messages of felicitations and good wishes. He also told his cousin about the plots being hatched by the Syeds to neutralize the gains of his victories. The emerging conspiracies and counter-conspiracies verged on the ridiculous in that each faction knew what the other was conspiring to achieve, but none dared profess, much less proclaim, the awareness of what was happening. They were more conscious of their comparative weaknesses than of their strength.

Abdullah Khan and his brother believed that intrigue was just when honesty was vain. Similarly, Nawab Qudsiya and her supporters felt that intrigue had a base in necessity. Necessary intrigue, according to them, was not immoral; it had a character and style of its own. The Turanis, led in Agra by Muhammad Amin, held high "the intrigue that liberates"; they professed little use for "the loyalty that perpetuates slavery". It was,

however, strange that none dared accept the truth of a Turkish proverb that "those who rise by intrigue shall by intrigue fall". Nawab Qudsiya is perhaps the only one to be on record to have told her half-sister, Begum Fatima Anwar, in near-lament: "intrigue in a royal House is like worm on vegetables". She was the wisest of them all. Both the Mughals and the Syeds collapsed under the weight of intrigues of this period. The story of this collapse is the story of the fall of the Mughal Empire.

In desperation, the Syeds decided to send a large army to the Deccan under the Emperor himself. Neither Muhammad Shah nor Nawab Qudsiya raised any objection to this arrangement. They hated the Syeds like hell-pains, and were in a way glad to have an opportunity "to breathe free air outside Agra". When Hussain Ali chose himself to accompany the expeditionary force in the capacity of adviser-cum-commander, Muhammad Shah for a while played with the idea of staying back on grounds of ill-health. The Nawab, in consultation with Muhammad Amin, dissuaded him from entertaining any such thought. "Anything is better than to be a prisoner in the fort at Agra", she told her son. Perhaps she knew more than what most loyalists were aware of at the time. She proclaimed her faith in God, and asked the Emperor to feign unmixed enthusiasm for the campaign ahead.

An army of fifty thousand men, well-trained and well-equipped, assembled in camps outside Agra in less than two weeks, ready to "avenge the defeats and deaths of Alim Ali and Dilawar Ali Khan". At the instance of Hussain Ali, the longer route via Ajmer was chosen for the march, ostensibly to seek the blessings of Hazrat Mueen-ud-Din Chishti at the Dargah, but in actuality to gather reinforcements of Rajput troops from Maharaja Ajit Singh. The royal entourage waxed fervour at this plan as, in the words of the queen-mother, "we will have a chance to pray at a shrine that brings solace to the weak and courage to the strong". Hussain Ali, in a mood of religious enthusiasm after a hearty meal a couple of days before departure, solemnly pledged an offering at the tomb of a hundred thousand rupees, and he rolled out many a verse from the holy book to underline that the offerings of the pure-hearted at places of pilgrimage seldom went unrewarded. To make victory doubly sure, both Muhammad Shah and Begum Qudsiya also pledged sizable offerings of "pearls on trays of gold and silver" on the first day of their arrival at Ajmer." There never was a soldier marching to a battlefield who did not regard prayer more powerful than all the weaponry of war. By and large, the mankind admire those who live to admire the grandeur of the supernatural.

The imperial army moved out of Agra on 11 September 1720. The Emperor rode a magnificent elephant flanked by glittering squads of bodyguard on horses on the right and left. Then came Hussain Ali and Muhammad Amin with their magnificently turned-out divisions of the Syed and Mughal troops. The spectacle of richly-attired officers and men gliding majestically past the large crowds gathered on either side of the road to bid them farewell captured the imagination of many European travellers in the city. Their accounts of the cavalcade are reminiscent of the accounts of Jesuit missionaries when they first saw Emperor Akbar's "military townships on horse and cart" move out of Fatehpur-Sikri towards Kabul. When the last column crossed the western boundary of the capital, the sun had almost hid itself behind the distant hills. The crowds retraced their steps, not knowing whether to hope for the best or fear the worst. The defeat of Alim Ali had spawned uncertainty about the shape of things to come. The old men and women prayed silently for peace and stability. The young searched their hearts in vain for answers to questions that everyone was asking. Hindustan was on the crossroads of history.

At Fatehpur-Sikri, the Emperor prayed and made offerings at the shrine of Shaikh Salim Chishti. The anniversary of Muhammad Shah's enthronement was also celebrated here with low-key rejoicings. Hussain Ali was not seen either at the tomb or at the entertainment held by Muhammad Shah in his camp. The reason given for the Syed's absence was indisposition. The word, however, went around that Hussain Ali feared foul play, and that he had decided to proceed to Ajmer in advance of the royal camp. Rumours feed upon themselves, and soon the entire camp was abuzz with whisperings about plots to kill Hussain Ali. The latter, an egotist of the loudest colour, brushed aside these reports as utterly baseless, saying: "There is not a mortal man who dare lay his hands on me. They are all not worthy even of tying the laces of my shoes. I am the kingmaker. Those who talk about plots to kill me are prize idiots. Asses know more than they do. I am outside the realm of court protocol. Do they not know that I am a Syed ? What I will and say is the command of the Prophet. Stop these evil rumours. The penalty for vain talk is death".

These slanderous remarks, made virtually in public, aroused infinite indignation in the royal camp. Muhammad Amin, whose hatred for Hussain Ali was as intense as his respect for the queen-mother, discussed the reported outburst with his three confidants — Mir Jumla, Haidar Quli Khan and Abdul Ghafoor — and together they hammered out a plot to

"end Hussain Ali's sojourn on earth and thus to rid the court of the most abominable man alive". The Emperor and his mother were informed by Muhammad Amin of their resolve at a midnight meeting in the royal tent. Muhammad Shah advised caution as the secret agents of Hussain Ali were present, as he put it, behind canvas in every tent. Amin pledged utmost circumspection, and said that henceforth he would not broach the subject directly, but through the mediation of the trusted Sadr-un-Nissa, the head lady-in-waiting in the Begum's tent.

For the next several tension-ridden days, the fair messenger carried letters to and from Muhammad Shah at the risk of her life. She moved about in the vast camp in the guise of a washerwoman, thus serving as a communication channel among the conspirators. Her greatest achievement in the fast-moving drama was to induce a high-ranking Syed supporter, Mir Haidar Beg Dughlat, to "strike the final, fatal blow against one who has the arrogance to consider himself superior even to the Prophet".

A chilly wind blew across the dusty plain when the sun arose, mild and pale pink, on 8 October at stage three from Sikri. Following the morning prayers, the Emperor boarded a gilded palanquin for travel to the Audience tent about half a mile to the north. As was customary, the queen-mother travelled in another palanquin some distance behind. Sadr-un-Nissa sat with her in the back seat. The two alighted in front of the prestigious blue-and-red tent adjacent to what was known as the Hall of Audience. They entered the well-furnished tent without exchanging a word with any of the maids assembled to welcome them. There was nothing unusual in their quiet, well-controlled behaviour. The queens seldom spoke to their servants unless they had to ask for something to be done. Half-smiles was the language they normally used to greet their staff. But on that particular day, the usual faint smile was conspicuous only for its absence. Sadr-un-Nissa stood pensively in a corner as the maids served to Nawab Qudsiya the traditional knick-knacks of dry fruit and *sherbat*. The queen-mother did not take anything except a couple of *illachis* and a small cube of candy. Perhaps she was not well that morning, the whispers quickly went around. Sadr-un-Nissa came up, and spoke to her a few words in Turki. The Nawab tried to work up a smile, but it was apparent that her thoughts lay elsewhere. Conspiracies are the dread of mothers. The fortunes of plots hatched in the secrecy of seraglios are always doubtful. The Begum wanted to be alone. Only Sadr-un-Nissa remained with her.

Shortly before mid-day, Hussain Ali, attended by a fairly large

retinue, came to "do his routine obeisance to the monarch". The meeting lasted for about fifteen minutes in the presence of Mir Jumla and Abdul Ghafoor. Hussain Ali was reported to have told Muhammad Shah that a communication was received that morning from Maharaja Ajit Singh, promising fifteen thousand Marwar troops for the expedition. The king nodded appreciation of the Rajput ruler's loyalty. He made no comment.

When Hussain Ali had got into his palanquin for departure, his trusted aide, Haidar Beg, came up with a petition from a Syed nobleman for restoration of a jagir confiscated a year ago. Hussain Ali asked Beg to come near and hand over the application to him for consideration. What happened next is told best in the words of a contemporary historian:

Nobody knew how it happened. The burly Beg, as he approached close to the palanquin, whipped out a dagger from under his robe of silk, and plunged it into the chest of the unsuspecting Vizir with such force that death seized him before anyone could go to his rescue. Instantly, the Beg pulled him out of the carriage, and stabbed him repeatedly to make certain that life was in him extinct beyond recall. Then he cut off his head, and was just about to force entry into the Audience tent when a pistol shot brought him to the ground. Beg lay dead in the pool of his own and the Syed's blood. The next to fall was the fifteen-year-old Nur Ali, a nephew of Amir-ul-Umra, who had used his gun to silence for ever the killer of his uncle. The defiant young man was about to escape when a Mughal soldier dashed out of the tent, and strangled him to death. The three lifeless bodies lay on the ground before the dazed Syed guards realized the import of the dramatic events.

A scuffle broke out between the two factions of soldiers on duty. The turmoil spread quickly throughout the camp. The situation was threatening to go out of control when, as perhaps prearranged, Muhammad Amin galloped on to the scene at the head of two thousand Mughal troops. The Syed bodyguards were quickly overpowered and taken into custody.

The reluctant Emperor was then virtually dragged out of the tent, seated on an elephant, and taken triumphantly to the camp headquarters where he formally took command of the entire force. The kettle-drums were sounded when the head of Hussain Ali was held aloft at the end of a long pole. The coup was successful. A few Syed supporters came out from their camps to give fight, but to no avail. The Mughals overpowered them. Some were slain there and then. Others managed to escape to Delhi in different guises. The wretched Rattan Chand, who had in his heart neither courage nor honesty, was found hiding beneath sacks of foodgrains.

Bound in chains, he was brought before the new Vizir, Muhammad Amin, in a state of delirium. He could neither talk coherently nor stand upright on his legs. He cried unashamedly when Muhammad Amin questioned him about the hidden wealth of the Syed. He swore by all the gods and goddesses of Hindus to deny knowledge of the whereabouts of the treasure chests. Amin took pity at his condition, and sent him to prison pending final orders with regard to the punishment that his misdeeds warranted. The wily, gutless Raja rubbed his nose on the ground in penitence of his sins, and he begged for mercy in such dolorous notes as brought laughter to the Mughal commanders present. He had to be dragged away from the presence of the Prime Minister.

Orders were given for plunder of the Syed camp and its treasures. For two days the Mughal soldiers, elated at their initial success, ransacked the tents and villages occupied by the Syeds. The loot that came to their hands was estimated to be of the value of rupees ten million. A majority of Syed noblemen fled the camp, leaving all their possessions behind. The Hindu supporters of the Syeds, like Raja Makhan Singh, Rai Sant Singh and his son, Anant Singh, took no part in the fighting that went on intermittently for several days. The Vizir took no serious notice of their aloofness and he permitted them to join his army unconditionally. The fact was that these chiefs were concerned only with their own safety and self-interest. Their support of the Syeds was not rooted in considerations of loyalty. They swam with the tide, seldom against it. In following the Syeds, they but followed themselves.

The death-blow against Hussain Ali was struck when the expeditionary force was camped nearly sixty miles from Delhi. For seventeen hours, Abdullah Khan received no news of the seizure of power by Muhammad Amin Khan. On the second day, a camel-driver, Daulat Khan, brought to him a scrap of paper on which was written: "Amir-ul-Umra is killed. Control of affairs is taken over by Muhammad Amin in the name of the Emperor—Rattan Chand".

This was a bombshell that Hassan Ali was not able to endure with his customary equanimity. His first reaction was to meet force with force and launch a massive attack on the Mughal army. However, at the advice of some counsellors, he deferred armed action till a new Emperor was placed on the throne at Agra. He agreed that it would be a serious handicap to fight against an Emperor; instead, he chose to fight for one. A search was accordingly ordered for yet another Mughal prince on whose head would fit the crown imperial. It seemed God offered to every Mughal prince a chance between the throne and the prison. The laws of

succession invariably became silent amidst intrigues and uncontrolled lust for power.

Hassan Ali's choice this time fell on Muhammad Ibrahim, eldest son of Rafi-ush-Shan, whose two younger sons, Rafi-ud-Darjat and Rafi-ud-Daula, had occupied the throne in that order for short periods previously. Ibrahim was twenty-three, a near idiot, and virtually illiterate. He waxed happy when told by Nizam-ud-Din Ali Khan that he would be seated on the throne on 13 October in the title of Abul Fatch Zahir-ud-Din Muhammad Ibrahim. When told further that coins would be struck and the *khutba* read in his name, he began to dance in joy, and said: "I knew my turn will come some day. The prison never really suited my genius".

On the other side, Muhammad Shah held his first Darbar as an emancipated ruler, a day after the assassination of Hussain Ali. Many honours and promotions of rank were bestowed upon those who devised and executed the liberation strategy. The mother of the Emperor, Nawab Qudsiya, received a jagir worth rupees one hundred thousand a year in her own name. This was apparently a recognition of her contribution to the success of the plot. In fact, the entire exercise originated in her head, and it was she who induced Sadr-un-Nissa to obtain the services of Haidar Beg Dughlat for the last scene. The years had taught her much which the days never knew. She played her part, both inside and out of the harem, with the skill and circumspection of a born fighter for freedom. What was more, she commanded the trust and respect of every nobleman in the Mughal camp.

It is not generally known that the queen-mother possessed a sensitive mind, and that in her leisure hours she composed many an elegant poem in Persian. Her verses elicited high praise from professional masters of the language. Her famous couplet that "uneasy pleasures and fine pains are for fancy, not for life" is cited to this day as a testimony to her intimate knowledge of the human nature. She never employed tired metaphors and phrases; the freshness of her mind was illustrated in the use of "new ideas, new modes of construction, and new interpretations of old thoughts". Her compositions were in many ways like the compositions of Zaib-un-Nissa Begum—fresh, lively, unorthodox and realistic. Muhammad Shah respected her, and it was said that he never did anything worthwhile that did not have her approval. The downfall of Hussain Ali was, by and large, her handiwork.

The march to the Deccan was formally abandoned; instead, a communication was addressed to Nizam-ul-Mulk, informing him of the sequence of events leading to the liquidation of Hussain Ali, and inviting

him to join forces for the overthrow of Qutb-ul-Mulk. Similar letters were also sent to Raja Jai Singh, Girdhar Bahadur, and many other tribal chiefs. The response was quick and favourable. Many Afghans and Mughals, including Muhammad Khan Bangesh, made haste to join the imperial army. The number of troops at Muhammad Shah's disposal soon swelled to over eighty thousand—a remarkable show of oneness against the Syed despotism.

In triumph, Muhammad Shah could well afford to show respect to the fallen foe. On the thirteenth day of October, the bodies of Hussain Ali, Ghairat Khan and Nurullah Khan were wrapped in gold-embroidered cloth and sent to Ajmer, after performance of the prescribed religious rites, for burial in the family graveyard near the eastern city wall. An account of this honour extended to Amir-ul-Umra and his two principal commanders was sent to Agra by the camp news-writer.

Not to be outdone in the Oriental art of deception through exercises of extreme courtesy, Qutb-ul-Mulk wrote a letter to Muhammad Shah in words of infinite veneration, addressing him as "Qibla-i-Alam" (holy altar of the whole world) and ending with "Your Majesty's ever loyal servant, Hassan Ali Khan". In between, he expressed regret at events culminating in "the untimely death of my brother Hussain Ali Khan and several other noblemen of the dynasty of the Syeds", and requested for punishment of the guilty as prescribed in the holy book. He also said that "the crime was no doubt committed by the enemies of the Empire for self-interest", and suggested that the Emperor should "guard himself against falling in the hands of these unscrupulous seekers of material riches".

The pretence is only a lie in masquerade. It did not take Muhammad Amin long to realize that Abdullah Khan was playing for time to get ready for an armed conflict. At his advice, the Emperor replied in the similar vein of self-righteousness. Proclaiming his belief that the truth would come out in due course, he wrote, in parts:

O' thou pillar of the Empire, we grieve at the passing away of Amir-ul-Umra. The killer, Haidar Ali Beg, is already in hell. Inquiries have been instituted at every level to ascertain details of the heinous crime. Please rest assured that the culprits will be tried in accordance with the holy law. Meanwhile, it will be appreciated if you will come over and take charge of the investigations personally. Unity is the crying need of the hour. In a crisis like this, trivial causes can produce momentous events. We agree that utmost vigilance has to be maintained against our common foes.

Your presence here will be a great comfort to all those who are pledged to save the Empire from falling apart.

The portentous phrase "I told you so" was often on the lips of Qutb-ul-Mulk after he received this communication. He was convinced that Muhammad Amin, in concert with Muhammad Shah, was planning to do to him what he had done to Hussain Ali. He felt there was no alternative left but to defeat the loyalists militarily. Since infinite amounts of money are the only effective sinews of war, he hastened to Agra to collect as much wealth as he could from the vaults of the fort and also to appropriate to himself the hidden treasures of Raja Rattan Chand. It was estimated that in one week he took possession of valuables worth rupees one hundred million, and thereafter he launched a hectic campaign to raise an army of nearly ninety thousand men.

Money at this stage was of little consideration to him except as a means to collect the wherewithal to demolish Muhammad Shah. Nearly the entire loot from the palaces at Agra was spent on procuring men and materials from whatever source available. Every new recruit to his army was paid two months' salary in advance, and it was not surprising that a large number of them deserted after receiving the payment. "In war we must leave room for strokes of fortune and for accidents that cannot be foreseen", he told the seventy-year-old Ghazi-ud-Din Khan Ghalib, a long-time retired nobleman whom he raised to the post of commander-in-chief in a desperate bid to improve the image of his force. The odds were, however, against Abdullah Khan right from the beginning. A hastily collected force, comprising untrained men with little experience of the sound and fury of war, could hardly be expected to vanquish an army riding high on its new hopes and new faith in its destiny. Abdullah Khan was perhaps aware of his handicaps, but the option before him to no war was death. He took the gamble, and on 2 November 1720, pitched his tents near the Qutb—a position which, he reckoned, would give him a good chance to check the advance of the invading army either towards Delhi or Agra. Reports about the size of his force aroused fear in the hearts of opportunists like Raja Makhan Singh, Chamaran Jat and some other tribal chiefs whose religion was material gain and creed chicanery. Neither Muhammad Shah nor Muhammad Amin was disturbed over-much at their desertion. "We shall be a more united fighting machine because of their absence", remarked Amin when the news of the cross-over was conveyed to him. Muhammad Shah went one better. "Good riddance", he said, and added: "The Syed will be weaker for their

support".

Hate is hell, and hell hate. Abdullah Khan's contempt of Muhammad Amin Khan was an obsession that befogged his mind and prevented him from taking timely steps to assure unity in his camp. Intent on crushing the Mughal commander with the sheer weight of numbers, he collected an army of nearly one hundred thousand men, the bulk of it owing loyalty to their respective chiefs, not to Qutb-ul-Mulk or to the dynasty of the Syeds. The result was utter chaos and confusion in his camp. No less than a hundred chieftains rode out daily on their magnificently turned-out elephants, each assuming the airs of royalty and trying to assert his superiority over all others.

In this cavalcade of grandeur, Muhammad Ibrahim was not to be seen anywhere. Seldom did he come out of the royal apartment to show himself out to the armed forces as the new Emperor. In the confusion of an intriguing mind, Abdullah Khan failed to realize that in the Orient it was not enough for a prince to be enthroned; it was more important for him to be seen by the people at least once a day in the full regalia of an Emperor. The impression thus gained ground that Ibrahim was a reluctant ruler on whom the crown was thrust by Abdullah Khan for reasons of self-preservation. Even the assembled chieftains did not do the traditional daily submission to the king. The Syed possessed the numbers, but he did not possess the Emperor with a charisma that engenders self-effacing oneness among the nobility. This unity is necessary for success on the battlefield.

According to the historian Khushal Chand, Qutb-ul-Mulk did not command an army, but many armies at war with one another. The result was many wars waging within a war. Hassan Ali gave orders for his men to move out of the Qutb complex, well aware that the gods of war considered no sin more sinning than the division of loyalties. Still he hoped to win. "The Prophet Muhammad will not unhand me in this hour of crisis", he told his brother, Najim-ud-Din Ali Khan.

On the other side, Muhammad Amin Khan lay increasing emphasis on what Khushal Chand called "single-minded devotion to the Emperor". He repeatedly told his chief companions-in-arms — Haidar Quli Khan, Qamar-ud-Din Khan*, and Raja Gopal Singh — that they were fighting for a cause, not an individual. Muhammad Shah became to them "a symbol of liberation from the Syed domination, and an emblem of liberal

*Qamar-ud-Din Khan was a son of Muhammad Amin Khan. He was reported to be "very brave, very loyal, and very hostile to the Syed family".

ideas that caught the eye of nearly all sections of the population". Though his army was half the size of the force at the command of Hassan Ali, yet its chances of victory were brighter.

Imbued with this conviction, Muhammad Amin sent Haidar Quli Khan to Hastnapur, a village four miles from the position taken up by Abdullah Khan. Other Mughal commanders followed in battle formation close at the heels of Haidar. The Mughals were the first to open cannon-fire, and they kept up the barrage virtually non-stop till the battle was joined near midday on 13 November 1720. Muhammad Shah, clad in armour from head to foot, rode the favourite elephant of Farrakh-Siyyar, Padshah Pasand. A huge tusker, the animal roared defiance as it made its way to the frontline of the centre. Several enemy missiles of stone and steel fell close to it, but none hit him. The battle raged fast and furious for several hours before the darkness of the night compelled a temporary halt in fighting. Both Muhammad Shah and Muhammad Amin, as also some other commanders, maintained a close watch on the enemy positions throughout the night lest they had to face unforeseen developments at the day-break.

The Syeds returned, however, to their camp at Blochpur, hoping to regroup their forces for launching fresh attacks in the morning. Abdullah Khan's decision to withdraw from the battlefield was a blunder that cost him heavily. There is no place in war for even a sound mistake. Having heard the trumpets and the alarms of war for the first time, the bulk of the mercenaries of Abdullah Khan chose not to return to the battlefield the next day. Their desertion *en masse* was an underhand blow from which the overbearing Syed never recovered. When the guns of Muhammad Shah's army roared in the morning, Abdullah Khan leapt on to the field with hardly a few thousand men coming out to support him. The engagement at Hastnapur became famous for the display of supreme heroism by Najim-ud-Din Ali Khan. Caring neither for bullets and arrows, nor for the spears and swords of an enemy sensing victory, he drove his mount, a high-speed Persian steed, close to the elephant on which sat Muhammad Shah. His aim was to create panic among the Mughals, and thus to force them into errors of indiscreet desperation which might turn the tide of battle against them. This was a vain hope, rooted perhaps in the obsession that God was on his side. The reckless advance of the horse that seemed to be aware of the mission of its master, was stopped by a barrage of bullets fired from close quarters. Both Najim-ud-Din and his valiant mount lay almost dead amidst the waves of uncontrolled fury let loose by an enemy hell-bent on demolishing the

Syed facade once and for all.

The fate that befell his brother spurred Hassan Ali to acts of bravery that drew admiration all around. In the tradition of the warriors of yesteryear, he alighted from his elephant, choosing, in the words of Khushal Chand, "to court martyrdom fighting on the ground than to be held alive by Amin Khan and his associates in loyalty to the Emperor". The inevitable came to pass shortly after he began brandishing his sword in defiance of the rule of Muhammad Shah. An arrow struck him in the eye, and he fell to the ground writhing in pain. The bodyguard of Haidar Quli Khan bound him hand and foot in chains, seated him on an elephant, and lodged him in prison for the remaining part of the day.

Meanwhile, scores of prominent Syeds, including many close relatives of Hassan Ali, were slain on the battlefield. Muhammad Ibrahim, deserted even by his bodyguard, fled to a village in the vicinity of the Qutb, and he hid there for two days before Inayat Khan captured him in a mango grove. Victory celebrations in the camp of Muhammad Shah comprised thanksgiving prayers, bestowal of honours on Muhammad Amin, Haider Quli Khan and four other leading commanders, and an announcement of cash awards, equivalent of one month's salary, to all men of the victorious army. Simultaneously an order was given for plunder of the Syed camp. The booty, estimated to be of the value of millions of rupees, was expected to be deposited in the imperial treasury, but in medieval times this rule was observed more in the breach than observance. Every soldier and every non-combatant kept to himself whatever happened to fall in his hands—a mode of reward considered only just and fair in the days when a soldier looked forward to victory as an insurance for life.

The next morning, Qutb-ul-Mulk was brought to the presence of Muhammad Shah. The latter ordered the removal of fetters from around his legs, and told him politely that "all this is your own doing. There was no compulsion for you to take up arms against me". The once proud Hassan Ali hung down his silvery head, and replied in a Persian verse: "The will of God cannot be changed. Man is under His commandment". Muhammad Shah gave a sorrowful smile, asked no further question and, turning to Muhammad Amin, said that perhaps it would be best to entrust Haidar Quli Khan with the custody of the former Vizir. Amin concurred, though reluctantly. He perhaps wanted himself to be the arbiter of the fate of his arch-enemy.

Abdullah Khan was lodged in the prison at Delhi. All his properties were confiscated, and the vast hoards of his treasures seized. All his

relatives were removed from the positions they occupied in and outside Agra. His legally-wed four wives were each given a stipend of rupees one thousand a month for maintenance. The rest of nearly three hundred ladies of his harem were given the alternative of either returning to their parents or continuing to live in a part of the Syed mansion with a monthly subsistence allowance of rupees one hundred each. A large number of the ladies chose the first option.

For nearly two years, Abdullah Khan lived the stoical life of a state prisoner before he died on 11 October 1722, reportedly of poison administered to him in food. Haidar Quli Khan, who became Prime Minister after the death of Muhammad Amin early in 1721, considered him an enemy too dangerous to be allowed to live the full span of life. With the death of Syed Qutb-ul-Mulk Abdullah Khan came to an end a weird chapter in the history of the Mughals after Aurangzeb. The two Syeds, Hassan and Hussain, rose to the dizzy heights of power and wealth through perennial intrigue, and it was through the self-same route that they descended down the vale of disgrace and death. They have become the symbols of the paramountcy of the law of retribution.

The sorrow-stricken Muhammad Ibrahim was brought to the presence of Muhammad Shah on Friday, 16 November 1720. The latter rose up and embraced him with a show of tender cordiality. "How did you manage to become the Emperor?" asked Muhammad Shah. Back came the reply: "In the manner similar to one by which you are today the occupant of the Peacock Throne". Muhammad Shah understood the implication. A stipend of rupees one hundred a day was fixed for him. An apartment in the fort of Shahjahanabad became his home for the next twenty-six years. He died on 30 January 1746, at the age of fifty. No tears were shed at his passing away. At his grave within the Qutb complex was placed a bronze plaque on which was written: "His day of power was short-lived, like a drop of dew on a blade of grass".

Thus came to an end the Syed saga of infinite ambition and infinite intrigues to gain their ends. Absolute power and boundless money corrupted them absolutely. Not only did they make and murder kings at will; they undertook a systematic purge of Mughal princes with a view to founding a new dynasty of their own. Like Aurangzeb, they came to believe in divine support of their actions—a stage of mental fixity that could not but lead to disastrous results for themselves and also for the people under their authority for nearly a decade. Their sins of commission outnumbered by far their sins of omission, a proportion that rendered the few virtues they possessed look almost virtueless.

Some historians credited them with large-hearted benevolence that found expression in the founding of many an institution of public utility. They strove, in their own way, to alleviate the misery of the poor and to ensure an equitable levy of taxes on all sections of the population.

But the economic good they did to the common man was more than offset by the political instability created by their high-handed authoritarian modes of governance. Nobody felt safe when the Syed agents were around. A few additional inns, roads and bridges were poor compensation for the increase of terror in innocent hearts. "With the disappearance of Abdullah Khan from the scene", wrote Khushal Chand, "there came to eat dust the biggest enemy of man, namely, fear, and there was to be seen in the eyes of men and women everywhere a new hope, a new realization of their rights under the sun".

The younger brother, Hussain Ali, was more arrogant and more hard of heart than the six-year older Hassan Ali. As supreme commander of the army, he held in his hands the supreme instrument of authority, and never did he yield to persuasion, threat or cajolery to part with it. Like all men of inordinate ambition, he distrusted everybody, even his brother. There are on record many a feud between brothers over division of plundered riches, allotment of jagirs to their respective family members, and appointment of commanders for military expeditions.

Hussain Ali seldom surrendered to the wishes of the Prime Minister. He would begin breathing fire when unable to sustain his stand by argument, and it was at that point that the statesman in Hassan Ali gave in. Their's was a team grounded in self-interest, not in the likeness of minds. Here were two uneasy partners-in-pillage, each realizing that together they might achieve which singly they could never hope to attain. Finally, their enemies got the better of them. There never was a nobleman who could sustain his position for long by means ignoble and treacherous.

The Syeds now belong to the dead past, but the memories of their misdeeds and the fate that ultimately befell them will for ever remain a warning to such seekers of material wealth as rate the end above the means.

Chapter 16

ANOTHER TURN DOWNHILL

WHEN wit fails, idiocy steps in and fills up, more or less wholly, the open void of sense. Muhammad Shah had won freedom from the Syeds, but he did not know what to do with that freedom. He was not wise enough to chalk out for himself a programme of action to halt the processes of disintegration that had apparently set in at all levels of the court, nor was he strong enough to crush underfoot the forces of unthinking opportunism sweeping across the Empire. His chief adviser and liberator, Muhammad Amin Khan, was as full of pride in his own achievement as the conqueror of Hassan Ali as he was of hatred and malice for lesser men. He trusted nobody, and he forgave none for what, in his reckoning, was neglect of duty. He was feared, not respected. Even Nawab Qudsiya, with an abundance of womanly craft in her head, did not dare oppose the Khan's will in any matter, big or small.

The twenty-year-old Muhammad Shah, inexperienced and woefully wanting in intellectual robustness, was thus reduced to the position of one shifted to occupy a slightly better equipped cell in prison. The jailer Muhammad Amin was not less sanguine and less self-centred than the jailer Hassan Ali. Since pride, in some form or another, was an integral part of the anatomy of a Mughal ruler, Muhammad Shah began to wax proud that he was not proud — an exercise in humility that deceived nobody. The astute Begum Sahiba sensed the concealed unhappiness of her son. There was, however, nothing that she could do at the moment to alleviate his misery. Her hopes rested on God on the one side and Haidar Quli Khan, Zaffar Khan and Nusrat Yar Khan on the other. It was thus that there began in the secret chamber of the queen-mother's intuitive self yet another round of the fight for emancipation.

Before entering Delhi by the Ajmeri Gate on 22 November 1720, in a spectacular cavalcade of horse, elephant and splendorously dressed

bodyguard, the Emperor and his entourage prayed in thanks-giving at the shrine of Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Auliya. Many an eye-catching offering of the yellow and white metal, besides a pearl studded sheet of white satin was laid at the holy tomb. Overcome by high emotion, Muhammad Shah strove hard to hold back the swell of water in his eyes when the high priest, dressed in light green, invoked on "our Shah-in-Shah, our protector, our guardian, and the keeper of our souls" the blessings of the saint. The entire assemblage raised their hands in prayer as Muhammad Shah, a picture of humility, bent his knee by the side of the tomb to do homage to the Auliya. The one-hour ceremony ended with recitations from the Quran and the singing of *qawalis* by a team of renowned artists from Lahore. Haidar Quli Khan and Muzaffar Khan were by his side as the Emperor came out of the Dargah amidst the shouts of Allah-i-Akbar by a fairly large crowd gathered to have a look at the victor of Hastnapur. The defeat of Hassan Ali was to them a miracle that could not have come to pass without the helping hand of the high and mighty in heaven.

A dazzling Darbar was held in Diwan-i-Khas on 25 November. It was here that a formal proclamation was made, appointing Muhammad Amin Khan as Prime Minister and bestowing upon him the honours similar to those enjoyed by Syed Hassan Ali. The *mansabs* of Haidar Quli Khan, Zaffar Khan and Nusrat Yar Khan, the three next men in the line of service and seniority, were raised by two thousand each. Further, a jagir of the value of rupees two hundred thousand a year was assigned to Nawab Qudsiya in her own name. "At the age of forty-five", wrote Khafi Khan, "her wealth became great and her influence greater".

Khafi Khan has given a lucid pen-portrait of the arrival next day in Delhi of Raja Jai Singh of Jaipur. He wrote:

> No lesser a dignitary than Muhammad Amin Khan went out two stages to welcome the Raja. The latter's distrust of the Syeds was in proportion to his high regard for the former Emperor Farrakh-Siyyar. Ten thousand Rajput soldiers accompanied him. He brought with him many costly gifts for presentation to the Emperor. Included in these gifts was a rare diamond from the mines at Golkanda. The Raja, a faithful friend of the Mughals, was dressed magnificently in a typical Rajput costume as he did obeisance to the Emperor at a special audience in Diwan-i-Khas. His arrival was announced by the Chamberlain, Khwaja Muhammad Mashriqi, in terms of rare praise for his courage, loyalty and service to the House of Amir Timur. Following the presentation of gifts by the Raja, the

Emperor came down the throne, placed his right hand on the shoulder of the dignitary, and he spoke to him for a while in words of admiration and respect. Many references were made to Jai Singh's services to Emperor Aurangzeb in the Deccan. The king described him as one of the pillars of the Empire, and hoped that the Raja's support would be forthcoming in making the Empire still stronger. The audience ended with Muhammad Shah girding around the Raja's waist a replica of the sword of Alamgir.

It was clear the show of honour to Jai Singh was not without a purpose. Muhammad Amin Khan needed his support for demolishing once and for all the remaining strongholds of the house of Syeds. He also needed the Raja's help in mustering on his side such non-Muslim elements as had aligned themselves behind the Syeds for reasons of personal gain. Normally proud men hate one another, but in the then prevailing circumstances the haughty and intolerant Amin Khan chose to befriend the equally egotistical Jaipur ruler for consolidating his newly-won authority. The same could be said about the Raja. He needed Delhi more perhaps than Delhi needed him. Both Marwar and Mewar were highly distrustful of Amber and its role in the complexities of the Mughal designs in Rajasthan and in the Deccan. Muhammad Shah was only a pawn in the power-game that the Khan and the Raja were constrained to play. The Darbar was a well-managed stage performance to stress that peace was around the corner, and that with a subtle shift of gears the ship of state would run smooth and fast on the road to prosperity.

The abolition of poll-tax, at the instance of Jai Singh and Girdhar Bahadur, was a significant step in the proposed march towards communal amity. Describing the much-criticised *jizya* as the surest recipe for disaster, the historian Sheo Dass complimented the new Prime Minister for what he called "the punch in the eye of those who saw in the poll-tax a means to enter the kingdom of heaven". There was jubilation among the Hindu traders as the announcement of the abolition was made by the beat of drum in Delhi and all provincial capitals. "Never again will this iniquitous measure be reintroduced in the Empire", said Muhammad Amin at a meeting of the *umra* called to devise ways to "undo the severities of the Syed era". The image of Muhammad Shah hereby gathered a look of tolerance although his role in the enactment was merely that of a stupefied spectator. A majority of Mughal kings rose and fell because of the deeds of their ministers. Muhammad Amin Khan provided a semblance of prudence to the inept mediocrity that was Muhammad Shah.

Little did the new Vizir know that his first act of studied wisdom was to be in some mysterious manner the beginning of yet another chapter in the affairs of the court. A few weeks after the proclamation abolishing the poll-tax, there appeared in front of the office of the city police commissioner a banner bearing the words: "Watch your steps Muhammad Shah. It will be better to quit now than to be thrown out later". There was consternation all around. Initial efforts failed to trace the man that gave that warning. Some months later, the kotwal of Agra, Mian Muhammad Nasim, brought to Delhi a naked Muslim faqir who had voluntarily confessed having put up the incriminating placard. He gave no reason for his act except that, being a servant of God, he did what God prompted him to do.

Brought before Muhammad Shah, he affirmed with a degree of touching pride his obedience to the voice of Allah, saying: "He is truly an ignoble man who does not obey the voice from within. Flay me alive, Your Majesty, if you so wish, but I will never, never, deter from doing what the Lord wants me to do. Some people say I am mad. This is not true. I am only mad if it is madness to follow the bidding of the Creator. I am ready for the punishment that you may choose to give me, but beware O'king, there is a king above kings. I am sworn to do Him duty".

Muhammad Shah, who put considerable reliance upon God, was inclined to take a lenient view of the faqir's "ill-advised act", but Muhammad Amin saw in the crime a conspiracy to dishonour the new set-up and an attempt to revive the Syed cult in another form. He secured the custody of the faqir with an intent to obtain from him the names of men who, he believed, were involved in the show of insult to the Emperor.

The third degree measures drew from the faqir only the name of Allah, no one else. Reports of the torture and its ineffectiveness reached Nawab Qudsiya who prevailed upon her son to order the return of the God-man to court. The layers of thick blood on the faqir's body were evidence enough of the tortures inflicted upon him.

Despite the pain and discomfort that he had suffered, the man, rooted as he was deeply in faith and obedience to his Inner Voice, smiled sorrowfully as he bent his head in deference to the throne. Muhammad Shah involuntarily stepped down from the high pedestal, spoke to him some words of comfort and sympathy, and handed over to him a bag of purple cloth containing what Khafi Khan called "the wages of his sufferings". At first he would not accept the gift, but later, following an intervention by the queen-mother, he took it saying; "Allah is great, there

is none greater than Allah". Set free, the faqir hastened towards Agra. He was never seen again.

The faqir, proud in his pennilessness, was reported to have said on leaving: "This is the last of earth. I am content. I am also happy. O' ye God, how I adore thee. The wounds hurt me not. They only uplift and inspire. Take me in thy bosom. I yearn for thy arms. Praise be to Allah".

It came to be believed generally that the faqir was a saint come to earth to tell Muhammad Amin and his like that faith was the shortest road to bliss. He left Delhi on 15 January 1721. Twelve days later, on 27 January, the Vizir collapsed when making ready to go to the court. The death was instantaneous. Efforts to revive him failed. His last words were: "Forgive me, great Lord. I am thy humble servant". He was buried the next day in the compound of the school outside Ajmeri Gate. Thus ended abruptly the career of Itmad-ud-Daula, Muhammad Amin Khan, Vizir-i-Sultanat and supreme commander of the imperial army. The naked faqir, however, still lives in many a legend and folksong of northern India.*

Three sparks kindle in nearly every human heart—pride, envy, revenge. The intensity with which a particular spark burns is determined by circumstances and the primary traits of the individual. Haidar Quli Khan, whose role in the victory at Hastnabad could not be underestimated, was an ambitious soldier, as full of pride as he was of envy and hatred for others. The manner in which he wreaked vengeance against Abdullah Khan and his brother was a measure of vanity in his anatomy. Often he waxed vainglorious about his heritage, his achievements, and his potential for high intrigue. The sudden death of Muhammad Amin gave his self-esteem a new turn, and it was only natural that he should aspire to be the next Prime Minister.

The agents at the court of Nizam-ul-Mulk, cousin of Muhammad Amin, were, however, quick to see in the unexpected turn of events an opportunity for their fifty-year-old patron to occupy the highest office. That the Nizam was at the time busy in the distant Deccan consolidating the gains of his victories against Dilawar Ali Khan and Alim Ali did not deter them from making a representation to the Emperor that the Vizirship be conferred on him. They pointed out that the Nizam merited the honour because of his descent and uninterrupted loyalty to the throne. They also referred discreetly to their patron's part in putting an end to the

*In one folk-song his name is given as Naranjan, and in another Najib. "The heaven became more splendorous by his ascent", ended the second composition.

dominance of the Syeds, and said that the appointment of any other person to the vacant post would result in "avoidable complexities of misunderstandings and covert enmities".

The Emperor discussed the matter with Nawab Qudsiya, who agreed with the petitioners that the supersession of the Nizam would generate such hostilities within the court as might become difficult to resolve. Her views carried the day and, much to the disappointment of Haidar Quli Khan, a *firman* was issued, appointing Nizam-ul-Mulk to the high post of Vizir-i-Sultanat, and asking him to reach Delhi without delay. Meanwhile, Haidar Quli Khan was asked to perform the functions of the Prime Minister pending the arrival of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Though his pride was hurt, Haidar accepted the charge in the hope that time might throw in his lap what the Emperor had withheld. The path was thus set for a clash of personalities in and outside the court.

At twenty, Muhammad Shah was too young to see any alarm signal in the readiness with which Haidar accepted the temporary assignment. He persuaded himself to believe that, impelled by self-interest, the veteran soldier would desist from involvement in intrigues to spoil the pitch for the Vizir-designate. Little did Muhammad Shah know that it was perhaps more difficult to separate old age from covetousness than to part young limbs from lechery. The stage was well set for plottings and counter-plottings of the most morbid variety.

It took Nizam-ul-Mulk nearly a year to reach Delhi — a period long enough to enable his enemies to prepare the blue-prints of open and clandestine attacks on him from the day he took charge of the office. The Vizirship was conferred on him at a grand Darbar in Delhi on 22 February 1722. The Turani junta at the court was understandably jubilant at its success, and it made it clear that no ploy would be left unused to defeat the designs of its foes. The palace could not but be a helpless spectator of the drama that was gradually building up. The increasing influence over Muhammad Shah of some unprincipled men and women of low status* made matters worse, and it became obvious that a showdown between the two groups could not be averted for long. The chiefest opponent of Nizam-ul-Mulk, as it turned out, was not Haidar Quli Khan, but the ageing Samsam-ud-Daula, Khan-i-Dauran, who lost no opportunity in and outside the palace to make fun of the Vizir for his mannerism, his peculiar halting gait, his robes of novel Deccani style, his half-Persian, half-Hindustani accent of speech, his long, lanky, ape-like arms,

*The principal personage of this infamous group was Koki, daughter of Muhammad Jan and foster-sister of the Emperor.

his unusual beard-style, his habit of chewing betel-leaves at all hours, his known preference for vegetarian food — in fact, for everything he said and did in public or in the privacy of his mansion.

Muhammad Shah not only not object to the disrespect implicit in the frivolous remarks of Khan-i-Dauran, he liked his quips and gibes, and encouraged him to exercise his wit in hurling wisecracks at the Vizir. An impression thus gained ground that the youthful Emperor was inwardly at variance with the pronouncements and policies of the grave, sedate Nizam, and that it would not be long before a way was found to relieve him of the post of Prime Minister.

Nizam-ul-Mulk was cast in a mould different from that in which had arisen Muhammad Shah. He belonged to the class of administrators of the period of Alamgir who put work above leisure and considered themselves guardians of the Empire. Political instability and a series of wars, big and small, had brought the country to the brink of economic ruin. High prices and scarcities of food conjoined to add to the woes of the poor. Intent on rectifying matters, Nizam-ul-Mulk launched a programme of economic reforms that hit adversely some influential members of the nobility. The cry went up that the remedies of the economic ills introduced by the Vizir were worse than the disease, and that they were aimed primarily at benefiting the Turani junta.

The opponents of the Nizam were quick to take advantage of these laments. Their complaints to the Emperor yielded results quickly. Muhammad Shah asked the Minister "not to meddle with the traditional pattern of taxation and revenue collection" — a rebuff to his authority that led the Nizam to decide that he was a misfit in the "sensuous, selfish setting of the court". He decided to return to Deccan. But for the time he kept his cards close to the chest. Two things were disallowed in the post-Alamgir Mughal India: A straightforward, outspoken nobleman, and a commoner who could hold his head high in the right of righteousness. Never had it been so bad before in the annals of the Mughals. The signs were unmistakable that the decay of moral values that had set in was irreversible. Muhammad Shah was an integral part of the environs that aroused the Nizam's revulsion.

The appointment of Nizam-ul-Mulk as Vizir had one beneficial result in that the rebellious Maharaja Ajit Singh of Marwar saw in him a friend who could be relied upon to evolve fair terms for an enduring peace. Following the liquidation of Hassan Ali, Ajit Singh* seized Ajmer,

*A favourite of Qutb-ul-Mulk Hassan Ali, Ajit Singh was appointed Governor of Gujarat with the right to administer that state through his deputy.

banned the slaughter of cows and buffaloes, turned out the representatives of the imperial court, plundered adjoining Mughal villages and townships, appropriated large sums of money from the imperial treasury, and sent his eldest son, Abhey Singh, at the head of a large force with instructions to take "full advantage of the disturbed conditions in and around Delhi".

The Rajput force, numbering nearly twenty thousand, reached within eighteen miles of the capital before Haidar Quli Khan, the then interim Vizir, assisted by Zaffar Ali Khan, came out with twice as many men to meet the advancing Marwar troops. A realist that he was, the Raja saw in this movement an opportunity to come to honourable terms with Muhammad Shah. With that end in view, he sent a vaguely-worded communication to Haidar Quli Khan with a request that it should be forwarded to the Emperor. The Raja, mixing pride with humility, wrote:

To everything there is a season, and a time to every purpose under heaven. The holy city of Ajmer was captured by me not from disloyalty but from the highest motive of saving it from desecration by hostile elements. The court representatives made no effort to understand my purpose. I was, therefore, left with no option but to oust them. Ill-advised and misled from the path of duty in reasons of personal gain, they chose to oppose me with force. The result was a fairly heavy loss of men and material on either side. My repeated attempts at peace-making proved of little avail. In the end, I decided to send my eldest son, Abhey Singh, to the court with a letter of explanation. His march to the capital was obstructed at every stage. This again led to some fighting. The city of Narnol suffered considerable damage in life and property. The blame for this mishap lay on the heads of local officials. Our appeals to reason went abegging. Abhey Singh was forced to take some unpalatable decisions in self-defence.

Now that the Prime Minister has come out himself to halt Abhey Singh's progress to Delhi, I deem it my duty to offer surrender unconditionally. For long years we have been friends and allies in war and in peace. Our loyalty to the Empire transcends our equation of trust with the Syed brothers. I would, however, like to place on record that the provinces of Gujarat and Ajmer were given to me in perpetuity by no other than your predecessor on the throne. I have in my possession a *firman* to that effect duly attested by Qutb-ul-Mulk. It is my earnest hope that Your Majesty will honour that award, and that I will be permitted to

continue to hold these two states*

I will be glad to pay my homage personally to Your Majesty after the current unrest in the territories under my charge dies down. Meanwhile, my son, Abhey Singh, will bow to the throne on my behalf whenever Your Majesty may choose to call him. I end this submission with assurances of loyal service to the day of eternity.

Haidar Quli Khan read this letter with considerable relief. He was not prepared at this stage to enter into a long drawn-out war against the Rajputs. The shadow of Nizam-ul-Mulk conditioned his reactions to developments at the court and in the camp. He recommended acceptance of surrender on honourable terms.

Every good thought Haidar had and every good action he did laid him open to pride and exposed him to the assault of vanity and self-exultation. There was jubilation in the imperial tents. A battle was averted. The historian Ghulam Ali, who was a member of Haidar's entourage, observed in his write-up of developments: "Nobody has time for show of pride except the weak; for everyone else, it is a sign of folly". How true! Haidar Quli Khan carried a weak mind in a strong body. He was waiting to be the Prime Minister. Nothing else was important to him at the time.

Muhammad Shah accepted the recommendation, and he replied to Ajit Singh as follows:

Your loyalty was never in doubt. The circumstances do at times force a man to do acts bearing the look of disobedience. You have done well to explain your seizure of Ajmer. At the recommendation of the Vizir, we accept your surrender. A cordial welcome awaits your son in Delhi. The province of Ajmer is reassigned to you for life. God willing, we should be able to make a similar declaration about Gujarat. We expect that your forces will be withdrawn to your domains within a period of thirty days from the receipt of his communication.

Abhey Singh came to Delhi with gifts of horse, elephant and ancient Marwar jewellery. He was received in the open court with traditional honours. Muhammad Shah embraced him, girded a bejewelled dagger round his waist, honoured him with a *mansab* of five thousand, allotted

*A similar claim was made by Raja Jai Singh of Amber on the basis of a proclamation made by Jahan Shah Bahadur, father of Muhammad Shah. This proclamation bore the imprint of Jahan Shah's right palm.

a mansion close to the fort for his residence, and asked him to "make yourself at home in the city where your illustrious father lived for many years as the guest of the court". In other words, Abhey Singh was not given the permission to leave. He was detained as a hostage. The loyalty of Ajit Singh was suspect.

Ajit Singh was taken aback at this unexpected development. He took time by the forelock, and struck with force at Mughal territories around Ajmer. This time Syed Muzaffar Ali Khan and Raja Jai Singh* were given command of the forces to "tame the rebellious Raja". . . The imperial army advanced speedily towards Jodhpur. When the imperialists were two stages from Ajmer, there came the news that the Maharaja was stabbed to death by his younger son, Bakht Singh. Marwar was in deep mourning.

The bards lamented "the loss of Marwar in words of infinite pathos, but the historians looked at each other in surprised silence. Many of them failed to get at the cause of the crime, and those few who happened to know the reason were hesitant to record the truth. Leaving a full page blank in his chronicle, the historian Madha Ram observed: "Time will reveal everything". Even Colonel Tod chose at first to gloss over the ugly facts, saying that the murder was committed at the request of Abhey Singh. According to him, the latter felt that the elimination of Ajit Singh was perhaps the surest way of securing his release from the court in Delhi. This explanation deceived perhaps nobody except Tod himself.

The truth was that jealousy, that green-eyed monster, led the otherwise docile Bakht Singh to thrust his dagger in the chest of his drunken father when he chanced one night to find the old man making love in bed with his (Bakht Singh's) wife. The death was instantaneous. The youthful partner in incest, her naked body covered with Ajit Singh's blood, sprang to her feet in fear and shame, and she fell on the feet of her outraged husband, clamouring for forgiveness and mercy. He paid no heed to her wailings, and left the room dazed, as it was, at her unfaithful treachery. He never saw her again. What happened to her is not known. Perhaps she was one of the eighty-four women who immolated themselves on the funeral pyre of the Maharaja.

With the death of Ajit Singh, there came to an end a mystery-ridden chapter in the Mughal-Marwar relationship. Pride and passion rendered

*As has already been pointed out, Raja Jai Singh laid claim to the provinces of Gujarat and Ajmer. He offered his services for the campaign in the hope of getting his claim to Ajmer accepted by Muhammad Shah. The appointment of Nizam-ul-Mulk as Vizir in February 1722, raised his hopes still further. The Nizam favoured Jai Singh more than he did the Marwar ruler.

him an unworthy friend, as also an unworthy foe. At one stage, he ran with the Syeds and hunted with the parties and chieftains opposed to them. He gave his daughter in marriage to Farrakh-Siyyar, and then conspired to make her wear the black-bordered veil of widowhood. He was totally unpredictable and unreliable. Heady wines, brewed specially for him in the royal distilleries of Jodhpur, were his constant companions; these inebriating drinks prompted him to commit many an evil deed. In one of his poetic compositions, said Amir Khusrau that the Lord would destroy the house of the proud rich who made a virtue of eating forbidden foods and drinking forbidden beverages. The house of Marwar was never the same again after Ajit Singh. There are sins galore in the cup that inebriates.

Pride and riotous living brought Ajit Singh low. His exit from the centre of ongoing rivalries in Delhi did not, however, in any way lessen tensions and create an atmosphere conducive to a just and fair administration. As has been mentioned earlier, Nizam-ul-Mulk was in despair at the prevalent corruption and behind-the-scene intrigues by a junta of pleasure-loving, self-seeking noblemen and their consorts. The witless Muhammad Shah virtually hid himself in his seraglio, leaving the court wide open for the activities of those whom Khushal Chand called "the hawks and falcons roaming the skies in search of their prey"

The helpless Emperor was in fact a sick man, suffering as he did from a complex ailment the court physicians were unable to diagnose, much less cure. The services of the French physician, Monsieur Matin, were requisitioned from Bengal, but he too failed to restore him to full health. Raja Jai Singh, who came in high favour at the passing away of Ajit Singh, sent to Delhi a team of four reputed Vedic herb-men for attendance on the Emperor, but Nizam-ul-Mulk, ever suspicious of the ancient Hindustani system of medicine, did not allow them a free hand in the treatment. The medicines they prescribed had to be approved by a panel of court physicians before they could be administered to the king. It was, therefore, not surprising that the team left for Jaipur within a month of their arrival in the capital.

One of them, Yogi Shankaranand, left behind a prescription of herbal medicines which, he said, could be tried in case all other medicines failed to yield results. At the insistence of Raja Jai Singh, a concoction prepared by distilling the leaves of these seven herbal plants was given to Muhammad Shah in small doses. The result was miraculous. Within seven days, "the Emperor walked about in the garden of his palace as if he had not suffered from any serious ailment". At his first Darbar on

recovery, Muhammad Shah gave Jai Singh the title Raja Rajeshwar, Rajadhiraj—a gesture of gratitude to the Raja, followed up by conferring on Shankaranand the title Mahayogi and a grant of jagir of the value of rupees ten thousand a year

The continuing quarrels among the nobility, which often erupted into fighting in the streets of Delhi, exhausted the patience of Nizam-ul-Mulk who, towards the end of 1723, asked the Emperor for leave to proceed to Ahmedabad on the ground of his inability to endure the severity of the northern winter. Muhammad Shah agreed to the request, and at the farewell audience he asked the Vizir to return to his post "as soon as the birds begin to chirp and the fragrance of spring is in the air". The Nizam knew that he was leaving for good, so did believe perhaps Muhammad Shah and many of his counsellors. But neither deviated from the pretence of cordiality.

The Nizam left with a show of utmost respect. The Emperor did the Vizir the rare honour of escorting him to the door of the audience chamber. The feint was well-disguised on either side. Never were there two enemies who parted on such a friendly note. The melancholy monarch was inwardly glad to be rid of a Vizir who made gravity the highest virtue. On his part, Nizam-ul-Mulk envisioned for himself an independent kingdom in the Deccan. He was pleased to let the north stew in its own juice. He took all his family members with him. The eldest son, Ghazi-ud-Din, was, however, left behind in Delhi as his deputy and interim Vizir.

As soon as Nizam-ul-Mulk crossed the Jamuna on 23 December 1723, Muhammad Shah, at the advice of Khan-i-Dauran Samsam-ud-Daula, set aside Ghazi-ud-Din and appointed Qamar-ud-Din Khan Itmad-ud-Daula, son of Amin Khan Chin, to the post of Prime Minister. Simultaneously, the ever-loyal Mobriz Khan* was assigned the whole of Mughal Deccan, first in the name of the infant Prince Shahryar and later, when that son of Muhammad Shah died following an attack of smallpox, in his own name. The breach with Nizam-ul-Mulk was thus complete. Steps were taken to block his passage to the south. Though some Hindu chiefs of Oudh and Malwa were known to be friendly with the Nizam, they were asked, on promise of high honour and rewards, to withhold assistance to "the near-rebel ravager of the south".

*Mubriz Khan was at the time Governor of Hyderabad, a post he had held for twelve long years. His mother brought him to Hindustan from Bokhara when he was only eight years of age. He married a daughter of Hayatullah Khan Kashmiri, an alliance that helped him considerably in his advancement at the court. He was in high favour with Aurangzeb.

Except Raja Gujjar Mal who strove hard to bring about a reconciliation between the Emperor and the Nizam, all other chieftains in Oudh and adjoining territories unhanded the fleeing dignitary in that they not only not call on him when he passed through their principalities, but also held back help either in the form of men or money. Some historians hold that the honest-to-God Gujjar Mal would have succeeded in his efforts to convince Muhammad Shah of the desirability of retaining the Nizam as Prime Minister had he not collapsed to death while in the midst of making his well-argued submission to the Emperor. In the Raja's sudden death, Muhammad Shah and his counsellors saw "the hand of God and His will that the treacherous Turani be not allowed to return to Delhi".

The Begum Sahiba, Nawab Qudsiya, was one of the few who differed with this interpretation of the divine act. She favoured the Nizam's restoration to favour not because she admired him but because she distrusted deeply the persons in line for the Vizirship. Her will had ceased to be the law for Muhammad Shah following his marriage in November 1721, with a daughter of Farrakh-Siyar. Her rousing youth, her ravishing looks, and her rich heritage—these elements combined so harmoniously, like the elements of a red, red rose, as to gave her a personality with an aura almost of divinity. The facile Muhammad Shah was swept off his feet by the charm of her poise and manners. It was only but natural that the mother faded into the background in the presence of Malka-i-Zamani (queen of the universe)—the name the Emperor himself chose for her after the wedding.

At first, the youthful, Malika did not interfere in the affairs of the court, but it was not long before she was dragged, willy-nilly, to express her views in matters affecting the throne. Her sights were clear, her wit alert, and her tongue highly persuasive. It was thus no surprise that she quickly replaced Nawab Qudsiya as the first lady of the palace, in name and in deed as well. Muhammad Shah took no major or minor decision without first consulting her. Her yes was yes, and her no no. Even Khan-i-Dauran, who was mainly responsible for arranging her marriage with the Emperor, sought her views before he made any concrete proposal to Muhammad Shah.

Therefore, when she waxed lukewarm to the suggestion to "let Nizam-ul-Mulk return on his terms", the pro-Turani group knew that the fight was lost. The queen-mother did not press her argument. She was old enough to realize that age could not triumph over youth. The Malika-i-Zamani was well on her way to becoming a Nur Jahan of the time, even though Muhammad Shah was no Jahangir.

The Emperor was not a hedonist in any sense of that word. Hunting expeditions around Delhi were the main source of his pleasure. Women, as a species, did not arouse his interest. The Malika was, however, cast in a different mould. "She is more than a mere woman, she is a friend, a philosopher and a never-erring adviser", he wrote in verse at the birth of their third child. Five of their off-spring died before the future Ahmad Shah was born in 1727. His respect for her grew with years—an emotional upswing that reflected more the strength of her personality than the weakness of Muhammad Shah.

It was in July 1724, that Nizam-ul-Mulk reached Aurangabad after brief face-saving halts at Ahmedabad and Ujjain. His force was large enough, nearly fifteen thousand men, to be able to cope with minor challenges on the way. On paper, he was still the Prime Minister, although it was generally known that his halcyon days at the court in Delhi were over. The appointment of Mubriz Khan to the whole of Mughal Deccan was clear evidence of his rift with the Emperor. Yet nobody dared challenge, much less oppose with force, his entry into Aurangabad. His authority remained unquestioned in the south. The Maharatta Peshwa, Baji Rao, sent him a message of welcome, and also assured him of such help as he might require in "the task of consolidating peace in the Deccan".

The Maharatta hostility to Mubriz Khan was an open secret. The latter had consistently refused to abide by the terms of a treaty signed by Hussain Ali when he was the Mughal representative in the south. Mubriz Khan was a proud man—proud of his heritage, proud of his achievements on the battlefield, and proud, above all, of the esteem in which he was held by Alamgir. The time had now come to prove his steel against one who not long ago had downed Dilawar Ali Khan and also the reckless Syed Alim Ali.

The news that Nizam-ul-Mulk and his family were safely lodged in the palaces of Aurangabad alarmed Muhammad Shah. In panic, he issued a proclamation reassigning the whole of Deccan to Nizam-ul-Mulk and asking him to let Mubriz Khan remain in the south as Governor of Burhanpur. Muhammad Shah hoped that this reversal of the previous order would prevent an armed conflict between Nizam-ul-Mulk and Mubriz Khan, and thus serve to preserve Mughal unity in the Maharatta-dominated Deccan. His expectation did not, however, come true. With the help of the local Afghans, Mubriz Khan had positioned himself for a fight before the imperial order came to his hand. He had also turned down an overture for peace by Nizam-ul-Mulk, saying, "The issue is in the lap

of God". Nizam-ul-Mulk, whose trust in his diplomatic skill was as great as his trust in the strength of his arms, then wrote to Mubriz Khan another letter, this time pleading in the name of religion for avoidance of the use of force. He said:

We are united in religion, race and loyalty to the ideals held aloft by Alamgir. For a Muslim to fight against Muslim will be a sin unpardonable in the eyes of Allah. Both of us belong to the same race. Both of us have had the privilege of fighting against the hordes of Shivaji under the greatest of the great Mughals, Alamgir Padshah. We will become the laughing stock of the unbelievers if we now engage ourselves in an armed conflict. I have not come to the Deccan in search of an independent kingdom. I shall leave the Deccan as and when another assignment is found for me. To dislodge you from Hyderabad is not my intention. The differences between us can be resolved peacefully. I am prepared to meet you anywhere you like. For heaven's sake, shed the posture of war that you have adopted. That way lies our mutual benefit. If a fight is thrust on me, I too shall put my trust in God and prepare to let the sword be the arbiter of my fate. I see no reason why the great Lord should throw victory in your lap rather than in mine. To avoid war at this stage will be a victory for both of us. Do please give a careful consideration to what I have stated. I shall resort to force only if I am left with no alternative. This is a pledge by one Mussalman to another.

Mubriz Khan was half-inclined to accept this plea for peace. He discussed the communication with his Afghan supporters. The latter were unanimous in calling the offer "a trap of words designed to seize power without having to fight for it". Mubriz Khan could not muster arguments to rebut their fears. The decision was then taken to send to Nizam-ul-Mulk a brief note, affirming the earlier resolve to let God be the final arbiter. Mubriz Khan went up the back of the tallest elephant in his force, and exhorted his men to be prepared to fight to the last drop of their blood. "Justice is on our side. We shall win", he thundered time and again. The trumpets were then sounded. An army of fifteen thousand men, well-armed and in good faith, was on the march to test the strength of their God against that of Nizam-ul-Mulk.

At the receipt of this news, Nizam-ul-Mulk too moved out, despite incessant rain and despite the advice to the contrary of his two principal commanders, Ghyas Khan and Iwaz Khan. "Victories are scored by speed, not by delaying action", he told Ghyas who held that the time was

on their side and that the Afghan mercenaries would desert Mubriz Khan when it was known that nearly eight thousand Maharatta horsemen, under Baji Rao, were straining at the leash to come to grips with their arch-enemy. The Nizam thought otherwise. "I would not like my God, my Lord, my Allah having to wait for long to give me yet another victory", he snapped back. He made it clear that his decision was irreversible. "The rain-God is my friend, not an enemy", he observed. Nizam-ul-Mulk knew the Deccan as well as he knew the lines on the palm of his hand. He wanted to trap Mubriz Khan and his haughty Afghans within a narrow, triangular tract of marshy terrain that he knew would neutralize, to a large extent, the advantage of their heavy equipment.

The Nizam's army, nearly fifteen thousand strong, set a fast pace, and in two days it reached within twenty miles of the enemy position on the right of a roaring stream. At the sight of the Nizam's fast-moving force, Mubriz Khan ordered a sham retreat with a view to lure the enemy to the vicinity of the stream, and then to turn back to deliver the heavy punch he was famous for. The ruse did not, however, work as planned. The U-turn taken by Mubriz Khan created panic among a section of his Afghan soldiers. They thought that the Khan had fled away in fear, and that the battle was lost before it was joined.

The shrewd Nizam pressed forward, and he took full advantage of the confusion in the ranks of the Afghans. By the time Mubriz Khan wheeled backwards, the Turani commanders were congratulating one another over a bloodless victory. Mubriz Khan, seated atop his favourite elephant, Rustam-i-Sani, exhorted his men to remember that God was on their side, and to fight on till "the enemy is forced to drown itself in the yonder stream of destiny". The hand-to-hand fighting that ensued was savage in its callous disregard for human life. No less than ten thousand braves lay dead and dying on a narrow strip of land within a period of four hours. Pride feels no pain, neither has it any fear in its heart. Mubriz Khan, when he realized that victory was out of his hand, threw caution to the winds, and he gave a rare display of courage born out of desperation. Bleeding profusely from bullet wounds in the chest and shoulders, he jumped on to the head of his elephant when the mahout fell dead to the ground from a gun shot. Steering the animal with extreme dexterity through a rain of steel and stone, he killed half a dozen Maharattas before the inevitable came to pass. He was pierced through the chest by a spear hurled at him from close quarters. No more was he able to sustain himself on the head of his Rustam. Before falling to the ground almost lifeless, he was heard to have exclaimed, "Now I will have

time to be tired. Take me in your lap, Allah". His bravery drew high praise from all those who saw him hurl defiance at what may be called the waves after waves of the angels of death.

An eye-witness to his final collapse, the historian Ghulam Ali wrote: "The finest sight beneath the sky is to see how fearlessly a man can die". Though Mubriz Khan lost the battle, he won for himself a high place in the gallery of the brave in Mughal India. There is a great difference between going off in warm blood like Mubriz Khan and making one's exit like a frog in a frost. It is high credit to Nizam-ul-Mulk that he ordered a hero's burial to be given to his chiefest foe.

Another feature of this battle, fought on 11 October 1724, was that the famed soldier of the days of Aurangzeb, Amin Khan Deccani, and his son, Muqarrab Khan, fought on opposite sides. The son, opting to take the side of Nizam-ul-Mulk, was on the lookout for his aged father for nearly six hours before he could lay his hands on him in the fading light of the sun about to set. Amin's head was chopped off with a single swipe of Muqarrab's sword—a dismal climax to the old man's much talked-about emotional attachment to his son's first wife.

Six days later, the Nizam returned to Aurangabad, well convinced that the hidden forces that helped form new dynasties of rulers were on his side. Though he had triumphed over Mubriz Khan, he was not yet the successor of Mughals in the Deccan. The key city of Hyderabad was still not in his possession. The eldest son of Mubriz Khan, Khwaja Ahmad Khan, held that city with a garrison of nearly five thousand men in the fort maintaining a close vigil over the movements of the victorious Nizam. It was not till January 1725, that Nizam-ul-Mulk sent an envoy to Hyderabad, asking Ahmad Khan to surrender the fort unconditionally. The usual promises of high honours and rewards clinched the deal. The keys of the fort were handed over to a representative of Nizam-ul-Mulk at a brief ceremony outside the fort on 15 January 1725. All members of the family of Mubriz Khan were treated with utmost courtesy. Liberal stipends were fixed for life in respect of every wife, child and close relative of the Khan. A jagir of the value of rupees one hundred thousand a year was assigned to Ahmad Khan.

The whole of Mughal Deccan was now in the hands of Nizam-ul-Mulk. Though he had no intention of breaking away from the Empire, yet he had little inclination either of acknowledging the writ of Muhammad Shah over any part of the six provinces. The defeat of Mubriz Khan was in reality the end of Mughal rule in the peninsula. The foundation of a new dynasty had in fact been laid. The victor was, however, careful not to

proclaim his independence and thus avoid giving offence to the court which had still some dynamism left in it. Time, he believed, made all things worse. The Empire was crumbling and it would not be long, in his reckoning, before it collapsed, leaving the provinces in the hands of those who governed them. Consolidation of his authority in the south was the task that called for prompt action.

The distant Delhi, the Nizam decided, should be informed of Mubriz Khan's defeat without spelling out the consequences of that event. His choice to remain sitting on the fence was the measure of his political wisdom, as also the measure of the confusion in the minds of men in the imperial metropolis. His communication to Muhammad Shah was a masterpiece of disobedience in words of extreme obedience. Two weeks after the surrender of Ahmad Khan, he wrote to the Emperor:

The man that roared defiance has been silenced once and for all. How, how, how little see the proud! It was pride, pink pride, the haughtiness of soul, that led to the defeat of Mubriz Khan at the hands of a humble, loyal servant of the Empire. I approached him many times, in the names of Islam, Mughal unity, and the high ideals set before us by the mightiest of the mighty, Alamgir Padshah, not to thrust a battle on this obedient servant of Your Majesty, but he was averse to heed the voice of reason and common interests. His vanity proceeded from want of sense and from want of intelligence. He thought too well of himself, and paid the price for this egotism with his life. I am sorry that he died, but I am glad that he is no longer there to obstruct the consolidation of the Empire into a unity. His eldest son, Ahmad Khan, surrendered Hyderabad to our representative a few days later. All family members of Mubriz Khan were treated with kindness and honour. They have been given liberal stipends and proper residential accommodation. I have no doubt that Your Majesty will approve of these arrangements.

In one of his communications, Mubriz Khan mentioned that he had been assigned the whole of Deccan. This news intrigued me. The reason for taking away these territories from my charge was beyond my comprehension. Perhaps some ill-informed counsellors led Your Majesty to believe that I was guilty of disloyalty. My record of service to the throne speaks for itself. Disobedience is not in my blood. I am legitimately proud of my heritage. The loyalty of my ancestors was never questioned. They stood by the Empire through thick and thin. As a humble torch-bearer of their high ideals, I am sworn to live and die, if need be, for the preservation of Islam and the Empire rooted in the

principles of that unique religion. Perhaps Your Majesty would like to tell me of the reasons for wresting from me the assignment that I had held for many years with a fair degree of credit.

I had no intention to come to the south when I left Delhi. The confusion prevailing in Gujarat and Malwa forced me to change my plans. The Maharattas in those states are on the warpath. The necessity of forging friendship with their leaders in the Deccan could not be ignored. I travelled to the south on a mission of peace, and was taken aback to learn that a grim war awaited me there. The great God was kind to me. Our victory against the forces of pride and vainglory is a victory for justice and humility.

The administration of all six states is now firmly in my hands. I shall do whatever I can, let me assure Your Majesty, to discharge my duties with devotion for the glory of Islam and the Empire.

This communication could not but cause consternation in Delhi. The Khan-i-Dauran and his associates knew inwardly that the ambitious Nizam-ul-Mulk had won independence without proclaiming it. Muhammad Shah had neither the resources nor the wisdom to reverse the *fait accompli* presented by the Nizam. For all practical purposes, the whole of Deccan was now under his sway. Perhaps it was best in the circumstances to give legitimacy to this seizure of power. Muhammad Shah consulted, as was his wont, the ready-witted Malika-i-Zamani for the next step. Her reply was typical: "There is no step left to be taken by us. The Nizam has taken all the steps that needed to be taken for a breakaway from Delhi. He is now an independent ruler. It would be best to treat him as such"

Muhammad Shah took note of his wife's advice. A formal proclamation was issued the next day, appointing Nizam-ul-Mulk as "our trusted representative in the whole of Mughal Deccan". The things that were left unsaid in this *firman* were far more significant than what was stated. The silence in this case was more vocal than any words could be. Nizam-ul-Mulk was recognised as the ruler of Mughal Deccan. A new chapter began in the history of the Empire.

Alamgir perhaps took a convulsive turn in his grave at this development. He had not spent in the Deccan half the years of his long reign to facilitate its take-over by Nizam-ul-Mulk. His dreams and his life-work were in the shambles. The Empire took another turn downhill.

Chapter 17

DRUMS OF DEATH

ABOVE the smoke and stir of the war-ravaged Deccan, there now came to be heard once again the song and tale of bards envisioning Maharatta rule "from the Krishna to the lofty peaks of the Himalayas". An old and haughty race proud in their capacity to win unequal fights, the devotees of the goddess Bhawani saw in their ruler, Raja Sahu, and his prime minister, Balaji Baji Rao*, "angels come to earth to liberate them from the foreign yoke". Their trust in them was deep and abiding. Not only did they look to them for material needs, but also for spiritual upliftment.

Since the death of Aurangzeb in 1707, the Maharattas had reconquered many forts and cities in the west (called Konkan) and the east (called Desh) of the territories which originally belonged to them. Sahuji, eldest son of Shambuji, was proclaimed "our king, our liberator" immediately after he was released from detention by Muhammad Azam when that prince headed northwards to contest the throne against Shah Alam. His popularity swelled into a type of hero-worship, a deification that raised a new hope, a new faith in the destiny of the people of Maharashtra.

The Brahmin Peshwa, an extraordinary man of unbounded courage and patriotism, gave a fresh soul-stirring spiritual dimension to the struggle launched by Shivaji seventy-five years ago**. To him, the night

*Balaji Baji Rao, a Brahmin, was the eldest son of Balaji Vishwanath who headed the force of ten thousand Maharatta soldiers that accompanied Syed Hussain Ali to Delhi in 1720 The post of Prime Minister under Raja Sahu became hereditary in the name of Peshwa.

**Shivaji, son of Shahji Bhonsla and Jiji Bai, was born on 11 April 1627, in the fort of Siwneri. Fiercely independent of spirit, he began to see the dreams of a sovereign Maharatta kingdom at the age of sixteen. He built the renowned fort of Raigarh when he was twenty. By the time he died on 5 April 1680, an independent Maharatta kingdom had become a reality.

had nothing to do with sleep; it was created by God, he told his bother Chimanji, to facilitate raids on territories held and exploited by foreign rulers. The night was his shield, his screen against the guns and arrows of the vastly superior enemy forces. It was he who formulated and perfected a plan to carry war to Mughal territories beyond the Narbada. The story of Balaji Baji Rao's inroads into the neighbouring states of Gujarat, Malwa and Bundelkhand over the next two decades is the story of the decay of the Mughal Empire on the one hand and the upswing of Maharatta nationalism on the other.

In 1720, at the deposition of Farrakh-Siyyar, the Maharatta mercenaries, under Balaji Vishwanath, spearheaded the riotings in the streets of Delhi. Eighteen years later, the ever elusive Maharatta horsemen, under Baji Rao, bypassed two mammoth Mughal armies, one led by Prime Minister Qamar-ud-Din and the other by Commander-in-Chief Khan-i-Dauran, to launch a surprise, night-attack on Delhi that very nearly drove Muhammad Shah out of the city. The reckless courage of Balaji was not the effect of fear, but of the unyielding resolve to be the master of his own destiny. To him, in the words of the poet Lalji, the test of courage was not to die but to live in honour That he retreated to the safety of the sands of Rajasthan right from the gates of Delhi showed clearly that his courage was neither blind nor deaf. When the report came that an army of seventy thousand Mughals was advancing fast towards the capital for the rescue act, the shrewd Balaji fled the field, with all his men and all his guns, as suddenly as he had come. To die fighting would have been to him an act of unforgivable cowardice. He wanted desperately to live, not as a species but as a ruler of Hindustan from Krishna to Sind. His dream did not come true, not because the Mughals were superior to him in armed strength but because a foreign power from across the seas turned out to be in possession of more lethal weaponry and also perhaps more lethal wits.

Baji Rao had the courage of the tiger, and a near-perfect sensibility of the measure of danger confronting him. It was, therefore, not surprising that the Mughal Governors in Gujarat, Malwa and Bundelkhand were not able to contain, much less demolish, the Maharatta raiders. In Gujarat, Baji Rao and his guerilla horsemen lent their support to Hamid Khan, uncle of Nizam-ul-Mulk, to buttress him against such renowned imperial generals as Shujat Khan, his sons Ahmad Quli and Hussain Quli, Rustam Ali Khan, Ibrahim Quli Khan, and many other lesser Mughal and Rajput commanders.

In the manner of a majority of medieval potentates, Muhammad Shah

did not like to hear the sins that he himself loved to commit. The reports of the sensualities indulged in by the Governors-designate, their deputies and their close relatives often sent the young Emperor into fits of rage. The holocaust of words he let loose in a communication to Rustam Ali Khan* was as devastating as it was perhaps unmerited. He wrote, in parts:

I did not designate you for the post of Governor of a key province that you may demolish the moral values sacrosanct in Islam. The orgies of drinking and dancing that you preside over in the camp every evening while the Maharattas are busy plundering the countryside are, to say the least, ignoble acts of self-indulgence. It seems that to lewd noblemen, the deeper the sin the sweeter. Let me tell you that you have not only betrayed our trust, but are a reflection upon God himself. We are told by the Holy Prophet (peace be on him) that those who swim in sin will sooner rather than later sink in disgrace and sorrow.

In consultation with Samsam-ud-Din Khan, we have decided to take the field ourselves, and to do whatever is possible to stop the infidels from making encroachments upon our territories, and to restore to their rightful place the religious and ethical values held aloft by the great Alamgir Padshah.

Before we set foot on the soil of Gujarat, you are required to cleanse the camp of the human abominations that you are reported to have collected there in hundreds. Lust, gluttony and sloth are the three capital sins for which a nobleman of your rank need to be taken to task without mercy. The scandals you and your favourite officials are involved in are the talk of the court. You are, therefore, required to immediately hand over the charge of your post to Ibrahim Quli Khan who will act as Governor-designate temporarily pending the arrival of a new appointee.

You are required to report at the court within six weeks of the receipt of this communication. Non-compliance will be considered an act of disobedience. The consequences of disloyalty are fully known to you. We are determined to root out sin from the lives of our representatives in the states.

Rustam Ali Khan was a strange character. In a crisis, he invariably did what he was afraid to do. A day after the receipt of the harshly-worded imperial *firman*, he mounted an offensive against a Maharatta brigade led by no other than Kanthaji. He fought with the fury of a soldier in disgrace,

*Rustam Ali Khan was brother of Shujat Khan.

and was killed not long after the action began. Perhaps he voluntarily chose death to the disgrace that awaited him in Delhi. When Muhammad Shah received the news of the fate that befell Rustam Ali Khan, he remarked with his hands raised heavenwards: "O'God, thou knowest all. The dimensions of thy justice are beyond the ken of man".

Muhammad Shah's anger had in it an element of prudence; hence it was like a flash of lightning that only rarely caused a blaze. The death of Rustam Ali Khan quietened the agitation of his mind. The plan to lead an expedition himself to Gujarat was quickly abandoned. Instead, the province was assigned to Sarbland Khan* with instructions to proceed to Ahmedabad before the appearance of the next full moon. An amount of rupees ten millions was placed at his disposal with a promise of "more funds, more men and more guns" in case the situation warranted reinforcements. Many Rajput and Jat Rajas, as also members of the House of Syeds, were detailed to assist him. Syed Najim-ud-Din Ali Khan, younger brother of Abdullah Khan, was appointed Deputy Commander with an enhanced *mansab* of five thousand. Raja Abhey Singh, of Marwar, also joined the expedition with six thousand seasoned Rajput troops.

Sarbland Khan took leave of the Emperor on 11 April 1725 at a ceremonial audience marked by much glitter and fanfare. When the sixty one-year-old, broad-chested general swore on his shining family sword "not to rest content till Hamid Khan and his Maharatta ally, Kanthaji, are hounded out of Gujarat", the assembly raised their hands in prayers for the success of the campaign. Thereafter, Muhammad Shah stepped down the throne and girded around the Khan's waist a replica of the history-crusted sword Alamgir. When the veteran general begged for leave to retire, the Emperor, in a rare gesture of goodwill, placed his right hand on the Khan's shoulder, and said, "May Allah protect you. The Empire looks up to you for victory against the forces of infidelity". Sarbland Khan bowed as low as he could, and left — a picture of dignity, respect and self-confidence.

The arrival of the Governor-designate outside Ahmedabad on 11 December 1725, coincided with the hurried departure southwards of Hamid Khan. The Maharatta chief Kanthaji had left a few days earlier.

*Sarbland Khan owed his rise in the hierarchy of the Mughal nobility to his connection by marriage with Prince Azim-ush-Shan. Later, he joined the court of Jahandar Shah, and served as Governor of Oudh, Bihar and Kabul. Following his success in ousting Hamid Khan from Gujarat, he received the title Namwar Jang Mubariz-ul-Mulk. He was born in 1674 and died in 1742.

The large force of nearly thirty thousand men at the command of the imperial general was considered too strong to be contained by the much smaller allied army. The city was thus ready to be occupied by the new Governor, but the latter chose to be cautious. He sent in advance a force of nearly five thousand men under Sardar Muhammad Khan. The latter was required to take stock of the situation on the spot and then report to the supremo on the disposition of enemy troops as also on the feelings of the population. The imperial agent carried with him nearly a hundred thousand rupees for entertainment and distribution among the poor.

The people of Ahmedabad welcomed Sardar Muhammad with unexpected warmth, leaving little doubt as to where lay their heart. Sarbland Khan entered the city sixteen days later in a cavalcade of imperial pageantry, and thus began a new era of hope and expectancy in the affairs of Gujarat. Repeated plunderings by the Maharatta hordes had left the state in a state of ruin. The scarcities of food and a state of general lawlessness were the challenges that stared Sarbland Khan in the face. He proceeded to neutralize these threats with a degree of uncommon vigour, and in the process he made many friends and many more enemies. The manner in which he suppressed the rising of the Bohra community under the fire-eating Shaikh Abdullah (1730) left little doubt that the Khan meant business, and that he would not be deflected from the task of collecting the much-needed taxes from all those who were in a position to pay.

The Bohra and the Hindu trading communities protested, at times violently, against these "discriminatory levies", but their joint agitation served only to strengthen the Governor's resolve to implement his decisions firmly. In July, 1730, Shaikh Abdullah, regarded by many as "a saint come to earth to rescue the poor from imperial oppression", was sent to prison, and the rich Bohra and Hindu tradesmen were forced to pay annually levies equal to double the amounts originally fixed. Sarbaland Khan's violence, when it was rooted in considerations of imperial prestige, had an unknown bottom. Thousands of agitators were sent to prison for unspecified periods. Protest meetings in mosques and temples were broken up by armed men under instructions "to still the voices that dare utter a word against the Emperor and his representative". The courtyards of many famous houses of worship became red with blood whenever the state security forces "used the argument of the bullet to rebut the argument of hunger and reason". When violence spoke, the truth was almost always lost in the noise of guns and the shrieks of the dying and the dead. Rumours magnified trifles, and the result was utter

confusion all over Gujarat — a state of affairs that could not save Sarbland Khan from the mud that flew all over.

Complaints against Sarbland Khan of "corruption and high-handed atrocities against innocent people" were sent to Delhi. In answer to an inquiry by Khan-i-Dauran about the reported incarceration of Shaikh Abdullah, Sarbland Khan's reply was a philosophic blunder that in the end cost him his honour, his post and his peace of mind. In addition to making some vague observations about the compulsions of administration, he wrote: "Ruthlessness is a quality so necessary for maintaining peace and order that it is always respected, even when it is associated with curbing the unsocial activities of holy men".

This reply shocked Khan-i-Dauran. Sarbland did not perhaps know that a niece of Samsam-ud-Din Khan, Bala Andaz, was married to a friend of the Bohra chief, and that she was keeping the Prime Minister informed about the "extreme violent methods used by the Governor to extort money from the poor for his own personal use". In his weekly submission to the Emperor, Khan-i-Dauran noted that the Governor's method of governance was without conscience and without respect for the Islamic canons of justice. He recommended immediate recall of Sarbland Khan, and appointment in his place of Raja Abhey Singh of Marwar — a change that in his reckoning would assuage the hurt susceptibilities of the influential Bohra and Hindu communities.

Muhammad Shah, who lacked the intellectual capacity to formulate his own opinions, gave his assent to the proposal. A royal *firman* bearing the imprint of the palm of the Emperor's right hand, brought to Ahmedabad in July 1730, the news of the appointment of Abhey Singh as Governor of Gujarat. Sarbland Khan reacted like a bull when it is confronted with a red rag. "I will resist it, I will resist it with all the means at my disposal", he shouted many times, and then issued orders for strengthening the defences of the city, and making it "impossible for an infidel to set foot on the hallowed ground of Ahmedabad".

Sarbland's rage, it appeared, was the measure of his disillusionment and helplessness. In the heart of hearts, he perhaps knew that the days of his authority were over. Many of his long-standing supporters had left him already, convinced that his policies of repression could not but end in his ouster from Gujarat. Besides, the Maharattas were back at their game of plunder. They spread havoc in the countryside, making it extremely difficult for the Mughals to collect revenue and prevent outbreak of violence against the local peace-keeping agencies. It seems his predicament at this stage was unenviable. According to Khushal Chand:

The treasury was empty. Revenue collection was a hazardous business. Maharatta banders were on the prowl everywhere. Corruption at high places had become a way of life. There was no respect for the law-enforcing agencies. Food was scarce. Prices were so high that the common man did not possess the wherewithal to procure for himself one simple meal a day. Brigandage was on the increase. The honour of women in the cities was not safe. The administration was not able to rectify matters; it had neither the resources nor the will-power to improve the economy. The Governor undertook tours in the country two or three times a year, but these expensive expeditions did nothing to alleviate the misery of the people. Desertions from the army and also from the palace were on the increase. A brother did not trust brother, neither did a son show any respect for father. The age-old family ties were under strain.

The rain also played the truant in two successive years. In these circumstances, there was hardly anything that Sarbland Khan could do to bring cheer on the face of the state. The use of unbridled force worsened matters. The Governor was in despair. The strain was telling on his health. Often he complained of illnesses the physicians were not able to diagnose. He was now in his sixty-sixth year. Some courtiers were alarmed at the manner in which he lost control of his temper over trivialities. It is said that age and strain go ill together. There were fears for the Governor's life.

Many other contemporary historians have corroborated the grim picture painted by Khushal Chand. Gujarat was hard put to it to keep itself afloat. The news of the replacement of Sarbland Khan by Raja Abhey Singh was generally welcomed by the people and also by the bulk of the courtiers. A change in the occupancy of the palace, it was felt, might bring about a change in the position of stars governing the future of Gujarat. The circumstances thus favoured the Marwar ruler. The religious nexus between him and Baji Rao was also a factor on his side. Both Muhammad Shah and Khan-i-Dauran pinned many hopes on Abhey Singh.

The reports of Sarbland Khan's decision to defy the royal order created some alarm in Delhi, but for once Muhammad Shah was not in a mood to compromise with disobedience. He gave Abhey Singh rupees two millions, with a promise of more funds if needed, for raising an army of thirty thousand men and equipping himself with such stocks of food and armament as may be required for "knocking the stuffing out of that haughty, old man Sarbland Khan".

Proud of his heritage, the Raja screwed his courage to the sticking place, and he pledged himself to fight defiance with every resource at his disposal. His younger brother, Bakht Singh, also spoke similar words of high determination and courage and, with a copy of the Gita in one hand and a glistening sword in the other, he assured the melancholy monarch that disloyalty would in no case be allowed to triumph over faithfulness. "Sarbland will have to change his name to Sarneecha before the year is out", he said with such self-confidence as carried conviction all around.

The brothers left for Jodhpur in a bid to "collect the best men, the best guns and the best balls of steel and stone" for the expedition. From there they marched towards Ahmedabad in mid-July. In a desperate race with time, they reached the outskirts of Ahmedabad in forty-six days, a feat of quick pace that took Sarbland Khan by surprise. Finding it difficult to hide the sparks of his nature, the old man cursed God and man for "permitting these apostates to take shelter in the holy shadows of the holy mosques of this holy city". Goaded by fear and pride, he issued orders at the rate of one every hour for preparations to "defend the bastions of our faith and our honour against those who equate the Supreme Power with images of stone and wood".

This fierce battle of words continued for nearly two weeks before Sarbland Khan realized that the time was on the side of Rajputs. Two envoys sent by him to the Raja's camp brought back the stock reply, "Vacate the city, and then we shall consider the propriety of holding talks with a disobedient servant of the Empire". Driven to mad desperation, Sarbland decided to "achieve either the glory of victory or the glory of martyrdom", and moved out at the head of seven thousand soldiers in a bold bid to "let the sword be the arbiter of my fate". His last proclamation said that the size of the armies was worth nothing if the gods withheld their aid. "Let us go to the battlefield in firm conviction that God is on our side", he thundered as he spurred his horse to signal the end of waiting.

A fierce fight raged for nearly two days before the city's defences crumbled, and the Rajputs, chanting "Har Har Mahadev", were poised to deliver the knock-out blow. What Khushal Chand called "the season of death" was now over. Sarbland Khan sued for peace. Gracious in victory, the Raja invited him for a meeting in his camp. The two met on 20 October 1730. The days of enmity were apparently forgotten. The exchange of turbans prepared the ground for an amicable settlement of the dispute. The Raja presented the Khan with a chest containing a hundred thousand rupees and a letter guaranteeing a safe passage for him and all his family members. Besides, Sarbland was permitted to carry

with him all his property and such members of his fairly large harem as wished to accompany him to Delhi.

The Khan left Ahmedabad before sunrise on 26 October. Gujarat rejoiced at his departure. Abhey Singh waited for eleven days, in deference to the pronouncements of astrologers, to take charge of his post on 7 November 1730 — a day considered auspicious for the Emperor, the Raja, and the people of the state.

The news of Abhey Singh's victory delighted Muhammad Shah. "We have killed two birds with one arrow", he exclaimed when Khan-i-Dauran finished reading out to him the report of the campaign. In joy, the Emperor forgot that the Maharattas were already beating the drums of death not far away from Ahmedabad. They were no friends of Rajputs. To rule over the whole of Hindustan was their prime aim. All those who were friends of the Mughals were their enemies. The concept of neutrality was anathema to them.

Baji Rao had one goal, and there were many routes that led to that target. One of the roads to Delhi lay through Bundelkhand, the land of Bir Singh Deo, Jujihar Singh, Champat Rai and Raja Chattarsal, all of whom wore proudly on their chests the red badge of courage and independence of spirit. Though a part of the province of Allahabad, Bundelkhand never permitted its holy, hallowed twenty-seven thousand square miles of land "to become in reality a part of the Empire". Over the years, the rulers of Orcha suffered many setbacks, but these only spurred them to make greater efforts to preserve the independence of their homeland. The wealth of folk-songs that laud their heroism is a treasure of unmatched value for a student of history.

The Bundelas were perhaps second only to the Rajputs of Mewar in the passion to safeguard their identity. They fought against the Mughals many an unequal war with results that would have done credit to a Sanga or a Pratap. Their men belied the logic of numbers, their women laughed at the logic of feminine frailty, and their children pooh-poohed the logic of tender years. The deeds of bravery of Champat Rai* and his wife, Riturani, are legends that have inspired the generations of Bundelas to honour freedom and to safeguard it, if needed, with their lives. Riturani, in the words of poet Ram Dass, "breathed defiance by one nostril and

*Champat Rai fought on the side of Aurangzeb in the war of succession in the hope of gaining independence for Bundelkhand in the event of that Prince's victory. At Dharmat and Samugarh (1658) his deeds of valour won high praise from Aurangzeb. The victor did not, however, fulfil his pledge to Champat. The latter fled to Orcha from Lahore, and closed the route to Malwa. He and his wife died fighting against the Mughals in 1661.

devotion by the other". Her almost divine faithfulness to her husband provided many a deathless story to the bards of the age. "When she succumbed to a sword-blow by an Afghan soldier", wrote Jaipal Singh, "the angels cried foul, and they rained flowers on her blood-covered body". Another poet wrote: "Riturani was a goddess, and goddesses are beyond destruction, beyond death. They live for ever in the hearts of their devotees".

Bards would not be bards if they did not exaggerate. Allowing for their licence to elevate mortals to the position of gods, it needs to be conceded that Riturani was an extraordinary woman, rooted deeply in the values of the spirit. She set her eyes on things above, not on things on the earth. Her courage was, therefore, of a type superior to the courage of those who put material gain above everything else.

After the death of Champat Rai, the revolt against Delhi was carried forward by his fourth son, Raja Chattarsal. At one stage, he joined hands with Maharattas in a bold, desperate bid to give the Bundela revolution a new, larger dimension. But he soon returned to his homeland at the advice of Shivaji. Chattarsal was twenty-seven when in 1671 he re-entered Bundelkhand with an escort of only five loyal followers. By 1713, the whole of eastern Bundelkhand was under his sway. For forty long years, he waged relentless, running battles against the vastly superior Mughal armies, and succeeded in carving out for himself a sub-state which he could call his own.

The losses suffered by Chattarsal in men and materials were very heavy. Yet he scored enough victories against some of the most experienced generals of the day to force Muhammad Shah to send the famed Afghan, Muhammad Khan Bangesh, to halt the imperial slide-down. The fighting that followed was fierce. Brute force was pitted against courage directed by prudence. The result was a costly stalemate—a circumstance in which the hawk-eyed Baji Rao recognised a God-sent opportunity to advance his long-term design.

In the beginning of 1728, a massive Maharatta force of seventy thousand horsemen crossed into Bundelkhand and, in concert with Chattarsal, laid siege to the Bangesh camp. The blockade was so tight that nearly ten thousand imperial soldiers had to subsist for months on grassroots and the bark of trees. Driven to extremities, Bangesh sent to Delhi urgent messages for reinforcements. Muhammad Shah, realizing the gravity of the situation, asked Khan-i-Dauran to lead an expedition for the rescue act.

The latter dilly-dallied, preferring to stay away from entanglement in

a struggle that, to his suspicious eyes, bore the appearance of a stage-managed show. He was convinced that Bangesh, with an eye on the throne, was in a conspiracy with Baji Rao and Chattarsal "to turn Bundelkhand into a grave for the Mughals".

Meanwhile, Qasim Khan, son of Bangesh, rushed to his father's assistance from Allahabad. Sensing danger, Chattarsal lifted the siege, partly because, with the advent of rains, the bulk of the Maharatta force had already left for their homes. The Bundela chief at this stage thought it prudent to come to terms with Bangesh. The thirty thousand troops at their command were not considered sufficient to wage a war on two fronts. A deal, said to be fair and honourable to both sides, was struck. Bangesh left for Delhi in October 1729. He never came back to Bundelkhand. Chattarsal died at Panna on 14 December 1731, at the age of eighty-two. His domain was divided between his two eldest sons, Hardev Sah and Jagat Raj. The long war came to a temporary halt; it had not ended. Both sides thought they were not the losers. Neither was a victor either. The Maharattas waited in the wings to take advantage of the deadlock. Muhammad Shah assigned the province to Sarbland Khan in the hope that he might be able to do what Muhammad Khan Bangesh had failed to accomplish.

Baji Rao was the astute war tactician of all. He perceived very early that the neutralization, if not subjugation, of the three adjoining states of Gujarat, Malwa and Bundelkhand was necessary if the planned Maharatta thrust to Delhi was to materialise. The forces under his command were accordingly deployed, at times partly, to scatter confusion in these areas. Nizam-ul-Mulk, who left Malwa a disgruntled man in 1724, helped him, not directly but indirectly through friends on either side of the Narbada. His successor at Ujjain, Girdhar Bahadur, fought gallantly for three years against heavy odds. Before he was defeated and slain by Pannaji, brother of Baji Rao, in the first week of December 1728, in a battle made memorable by the manner in which the Jat chief killed twenty-one Maharatta soldiers before he received the fatal sword-cut just above his left shoulder. Girdhar continued to flourish his long rapier even when he lay dying on the ground. His last words were: "How sweetly do I float upon the wings of death. I have done my duty. Honest effort is never wasted. It is no shame to go down in a fighting finish". These words, were inscribed in gold letters on a silver plate, and kept for years in the palace library at Agra.

The news of the death of Girdhar Bahadur saddened Muhammad Shah. "He was firm in loyalty and courage", said the Emperor. In

recognition of his bravery, Girdhar's son, Bhwani Ram, was raised to the rank of five thousand and appointed interim Governor of Malwa pending its assignment to a senior nobleman. At the intercession of the artful Rahim-un-Nissa (known generally by the name Koki Jiu) the post went to Muhammad Khan Bangesh in 1731 — an appointment that could not but cause dissensions at the court and give rise to speculation that heavy bribes were given to Koki's relatives and agents to secure a general pardon for Bangesh for his acts of disobedience at Ahmedabad. According to a British traveller, John Rightman, a rumour was rife in Delhi that Koki herself had received from Bangesh presents of gold and diamonds worth a million rupees for her mediatory act.

It was common knowledge that the appointment of Bangesh was made over the head of Khan-i-Dauran who, according to Khushal Chand, "considered the Afghan a lunatic not worthy of any post of trust".

The Maharattas lifted the siege of Ujjain as soon as Bangesh entered the state at the head of nearly fifty thousand Afghans. This initial success gave Bangesh self-confidence, and it gave the ever-watchful Nizam-ul-Mulk much food for thought. The latter sent to Bangesh a letter that spelt out clearly his hopes, fears and designs. After congratulating Bangesh on his success, the Nizam wrote:

As you no doubt know, Muhammad Shah is a prize idiot. He has neither sense in his head nor warmth in his heart. His counsellors are spineless fools who do not possess the capacity to understand the implications of the game that the Maharattas are out to play. The Empire is facing a grave crisis. Baji Rao is resolved to root out Islam from Hindustan. Unless the faithful take some timely steps to check the rise of Maharatta power, we may soon find ourselves facing an enemy sworn to carry the saffron flag right up to the banks of Nilab. To avert that eventuality, I suggest that we meet without delay and chalk out a plan to defend effectively all that was dear to the sagacious Alamgir Padshah. Provided it suits your convenience, the proposed meeting may be held in mid-April (1731) at a mutually agreed venue on the bank of the Narbada. The fate of the Empire, as also the fate of Islam in this country, is at stake. I hope most ardently that the proposal will meet with your approval. Time is on the side of Baji Rao. We need to move with utmost speed to avert what may (God forbid) turn out to be a catastrophe.

As was his custom, Bangesh at first blew off some steam against the "unfaithful ape with no capacity to think rationally", but later, at the

instance of his top advisor, Maulana Hasim-ud-Din Khan, gave the proposal a close consideration and, lo, a communication was sent to Burhanpur welcoming "an initiative that may turn out to be a landmark in the post-Alamgir history of the Mughals". Nizam-ul-Mulk was delighted at the response, and he did not lose any time to suggest that they meet at Akbarabad "to work out a joint strategy to rid the Empire of our common foes". Besides the usual hyperbole of word and thought, he wrote:

We are henceforth brothers bound together by common interests and common commitments to God. The decay that has set in the affairs of the Empire is due not to the fault in our stars, but in ourselves. For too long have we been complacent about the rising tide of Maharatta power. It is high time that steps are now taken to rid the world of these abominable creatures. God willing, there will soon come to sight a silver lining without a speck of cloud to mar its beauty.

I am making arrangements for the meeting to be held at Akbarabad from 11 April onwards. We shall not part without reaching an accord. This is my hope, my pledge.

Both sides agreed that to blink the reality of the Maharatta menace would be an act of unpardonable insanity. For twelve days they deliberated behind the scenes on the military and religious aspects of the threat, and they came to the conclusion that "not to make amends for our past lapses will be to sin double".

Though their decisions were not made public, yet it may not be wrong to assume that they decided to act in concert, first to defuse, by joint diplomatic and military steps, the Maharatta danger, and secondly to wean away Muhammad Shah from his on and off the stage advisors. The two men parted after exchange of turbans and performing other Oriental gimmicks to underline friendship and unity. The day was Friday and the date 24 April — a point of year considered auspicious by astrologers for parting of friends pledged to work together for the common good.

Folly, in some form or other, is the great staple of history. There will be little to write about if men made no mistakes. The Nizam-Bangesh conclave turned out to be an error that helped only the forces of disintegration. Together, they committed the oldest folly, that is treachery, in a new kind of way. They both saw distant visions of the throne at Delhi. Ambition blinded them, and they deceived one another in trying to work insidiously for the overthrow of Muhammad Shah. In fact, both

of them harboured secret plans to wear the crown with the help of Maharattas. Thus they played into the hands of Baji Rao who was ever vigilant to take advantage of cleavages in the camp of his foes. Bangesh fell because he was vain and treacherous. The Nizam had to rest content for the time in Burhanpur because his guile failed to keep pace with his ambition. And Baji Rao did reach Delhi in due time because he was steadfast in his purpose. His virtues were that of an honest plunderer. It may be said that he rose by sin. The pretence of virtue did not help either Bangesh or Nizam-ul-Mulk. In the muddle, Muhammad Shah remained unscathed. Misfortune and humiliations of another kind awaited him. Nadir Shah was on the move from Persia.

The Akbarabad meet could not but cause a degree of alarm in the Maharatta camp. Baji Rao was a man of action, not of idle speculations. With the set resolve not to let the anti-Maharatta alliance get off the ground, he marched against Nizam-ul-Mulk at the head of a force as mobile as it was power-loaded. The Nizam, not in a position to take on Baji Rao alone, waxed suave and friendly, and he bent over backwards to assure the Peshwa that he harboured no plan to come into conflict with the house of Shivaji. To make his version of the Akbarabad meet credible, he hinted that he had to use all his persuasive skill to dissuade Bangesh from his resolve to "neutralize the Peshwa before asking for reinforcements to proceed against Raja Sahu".

Baji Rao knew that the Nizam was not telling the truth, but to extract the maximum advantage from his fear, he offered to leave him in peace provided a formal agreement was signed to give the Maharattas a free hand in mounting plundering expeditions into northern India. The Nizam did not hesitate to set his hand to this agreement. Baji Rao turned back, not to mark time on the banks of the Narbada but to mount a massive attack on Bangesh in Malwa. The scorch-earth carried by a hundred thousand booty-hungry Maharatta soldiers unnerved the Afghan who first appealed to Nizam-ul-Mulk and then to the Emperor for immediate reinforcements. His requests went unheeded. The situation worsened rapidly. Ujjain was virtually under siege when the news came that the Emperor had nominated Raja Jai Singh to succeed Bangesh in the post of Governor. Simultaneously, as a price for his withdrawal from Ujjain, Baji Rao was offered the post of Deputy Governor.

By this ignoble gesture of reconciliation, the Mughals all but conceded victory to the Peshwa — an outcome of two years' continuous hit-and-run fighting inside Malwa that became cocktail exhilaration to Baji Rao. The fire-eating Bangesh was out of his way. The road to Delhi was

now straight and clear. Jai Singh, Baji Rao was convinced, could be prevailed upon to cooperate in making the much talked-about Hindu revival a reality. "Religion is a nexus stronger than any provided by considerations of loyalty", he told his brother Chimanji.

There are many types of courage. The courage to use the right means to attain a laudable objective is perhaps the most perfect type of this virtue. The lesser varieties are determined by the quantums of the right end and the right means. The courage of Baji Rao, like that of Shivaji and Aurangzeb, was not of the highest variety. He applied doubtful means to give content to Maharatta nationalism. His courage was, therefore, neither constant nor uniform; it rose and fell with the occasion.

With the arrival in Malwa of Raja Jai Singh in 1734, the courage of Baji Rao rose sky high. He had the Mughals already on the run. The distance between Delhi and Ujjain shrank, as it were, all of a sudden. Baji Rao was ready for the jump to kill.

Chapter 18

THE WHEEL COMES FULL CIRCLE

THERE are some skills which can be taught as children are taught to speak and walk, others defy instruction. The skill to govern is something that cannot be imparted even by the most efficient tutor or preceptor. To be an effective monarch, specially in medieval times, one had to be born with certain faculties of intuitive perception that made governance easy. It seems that God did not fashion Muhammad Shah to be a king. The role was thrust on him by destiny working in the garb of Syed Abdullah Khan.

Muhammad Shah did whatever was possible within his innate capacities, to meet the challenges of the day, but the areas of his helplessness remained far wider than the areas in which he could show even the minimal results. The one glaring deficiency in his anatomy was the absence of courage, the strongest and the proudest of all virtues for the monarch of a turbulent state like the Mughal Empire in the first half of the eighteenth century. Muhammad Shah was a man of straw, weak and gutless, who depended for the most part on the advice of his favourite mistresses, slaves and eunuchs.

The leading insider of all his harem was Koki Jiu*, a woman as handsome as she was avaricious and ambitious. For twelve years "not a blade of grass moved in the palace without her will", and even the Vizir and the Commander-in-Chief had to offer her heavy bribes to secure royal approval for any proposal. She was the pivot on which revolved the throne. According to Shoab, "her evil genius cast its shadow over the

*As has been recorded earlier, Koki Jiu (original name Rahim-un-Nissa) was one of the six children—four sons and two daughters—of the astrologer Jan Muhammad. She was so pretty, well-educated and well-mannered as to win the confidence and admiration of the queen-mother, Nawab Qudsiya. To facilitate her free access to the palace, Qudsiya concocted the story that Rahim-un-Nissa and Roshan Akhtar were breast-fed in infancy by the same nurse; hence she came to be known as the Emperor's foster-sister.

palace, the court, the imperial armies, and over every department of government in Delhi and in provincial capitals."

Every coward generally is a liar and every man of courage a man of his word. It was, therefore, not surprising that Muhammad Shah made promises only to break them, and he vowed submission to the will of Allah only to bow his head before the will of Koki Jiu. Neither his friends nor his foes trusted the Emperor. The result was confusion, mistrust and mass dissatisfaction at every level of administration. The top three in the hierarchy of nobility—Qamar-ud-din Khan, Samsam-ud-Din Khan-i-Dauran, and Muzaffar Khan Roshan-ud-Daula—despaired of their inability to set things right, and they took refuge, for self-survival, in the age-old method of swimming with the tide.

As a result, administration was in the shambles. The Emperor was there only, again to quote Shoab, "to wear the crown and sit on the throne, for nothing else". There was respect neither for law nor the law-enforcing agencies. The provincial governors tended increasingly to take important decisions without consulting the centre. Doubts arose about the loyalty of the armed forces. Key posts went to the friends and relatives of Koki. Corruption became an accepted way of life at the court. The agents of Koki and her relatives made it known that there was no favour that could not be purchased at a price. It was estimated that the hoarded wealth of Koki touched the nine-figure mark.

The adjuncts of corruption at high places also shone prominently in the mansions of the nobility. Dancing girls and women of easy virtues were in demand everywhere. According to Khushal Chand, "the grotteagues in the nature of man took control, and the high religious and Timurid traditions by which lived the nobility in the days of emperors Akbar and Alamgir became conspicuous only for their absence".

The hideosity of lascivious behaviour was sometimes hidden, sometimes overcome, but it was seldom deprecated as un-Islamic and unworthy of the followers of the Prophet. An Urdu couplet by Mirza Nafees that "the best way to govern sensuous impulses is to obey them" gained extraordinary popularity. The people were not at variance with the Law, nor the law with the people; both subserved the example of the court. Seldom before had the court at Delhi fallen to this low of depravity. Even the Emperor once wrote to the Vizir Qamar-ud-Din: "Come back from the tour quickly. In your company, wine is lawful, without you water prohibited". The Koki era was an era of extreme sensuality. The oldest sin was now committed openly in the newest kind of ways.

The riot of shoe-sellers in March 1729, was only a reflection of the

moral decadence of the people and the court in Delhi. The accidental death of Haji Hafiz at the hands of an agent of the Emperor's favourite eunuch, Khidmatgar Khan*, sparked an armed disturbance in the court-yard of the Badshahi mosque. Hundreds lost their lives, many times that number were wounded. Houses of noblemen were looted and set on fire. The angry crowds marched towards the palace, shouting, "Revenge is our birthright. We want justice". Muhammad Shah gave orders for the arrest and punishment of the guilty. But there was no one ready to carry out these orders. The Vizir and the army commanders hid themselves behind the stonewalls of their mansions. The leaderless palace guards looked helplessly at the surging crowds hell-bent on destruction. The law and order machinery broke down completely. For many hours, the Emperor shut himself up in the apartment of his mother.

In the end, Qamar-ud-Din managed somehow to assuage the mob. Perhaps it was time that did what reason had failed to do. In gratitude, the Emperor sent to the Vizir the gift of his own turban. A mosque was built at the place where Haji Hafiz was subsequently buried with high honours. No action was taken against those who were known to have indulged in orgies of loot and killings. A remark made by Roshan-ud-Daula** a day after peace was restored summed up in a way the thinking and priorities of the people in general and the nobility in particular. In the course of a submission before the Emperor, he was reported to have observed in verse: Men should rather have their fill of sleep, love, singing and dancing than of vengeance, destruction and such like offensive occupations. "We have had enough of the sword and the bullet. It is now time for the wine flask and the pleasures of the senses. The reign of the merciful Muhammad Shah is synonymous with the reign of the gods of love and plenty".

As the monarch gave a smile of appreciation for the thought expressed, Qamar-ud-Din Khan and others forgot the rioting and competed

*Khidmatgar Khan (original name Khwaja Ambar) was educated and groomed for responsible position by Aurangzeb. Being wise enough to play the fool, he became a favourite of Koki Jiu. As her agent, Khidmatgar amassed immense wealth, and at one stage he was considered the most powerful man at the court. He died at Delhi in June 1732.

**Roshan-ud-Daula (original name Khwaja Muzaffar) came to prominence in the reign of Farrakh-Siyyar. As a favourite of Koki Jiu, he acquired a *mansab* of six thousand early in the reign of Muhammad Shah. He spent a large portion of his wealth in building mosques, schools, inns and other charitable institutions. On the birthday of the Prohet he distributed food to the poor with his own hands, and illuminated with thousands of candles the road from Delhi to the Qutb. He was a follower of Shah Bhik. In deference to the wish of his preceptor, he built for himself a tomb at Panipat. He died at Delhi in 1736.

with one another in praising Muhammad Shah for virtues he did not possess. Flattery, as a fine art, has always flourished in decadent societies. To hear pleasant lies about oneself is the staple food of the mediocrities sans virtue, sans grace. Muhammad Shah was not driven by passion, as were Babar, Akbar, Shah Jahan and even Aurangzeb, in the larger meaning of that word. His passion was nothing more than an obsession with the lures of flesh. Such corollaries of passion as love, courage, freedom, and charity were beyond his comprehension; he was a small man whom nature gave the throne perhaps in compensation for innate foolishness. The rioting meant to him no more than an explosion of anger at the death of a priest. No effort was made by him, or by anyone of his ministers, to analyse the basic underlying reason for such a mass violent protest. The Mughal Raj had come to a sad plight in that it did not keep its fingers on the pulse of the population. The nexus of sympathy between the king and his subjects had broken down. The grave of Haji Hafiz symbolised in a way the near extinction of the political wisdom of the Chughtais. The shadow of Koki fell heavily over the affairs of Hindustan.

A fool always finds greater fools to admire him. One such eccentric who found favour with Muhammad Shah was Shah Abdul Ghaffur who, equating himself with God, made millions of rupees through practices corrupt and shameful. Originally a cloth-weaver of Sind, he first set himself up as an astrologer and then as "an interpreter of the voice of Allah" in the north-west. Later he came to Delhi, and made his living by selling amulets and making his "spiritual services" available to persons in difficulties. This fellow had wits enough to play the saint well. Many noblemen, including Nizam-ul-Mulk, came under his spell, and it was not long before an invitation came from the palace for a private audience with the Emperor and Malika-i-Dauran. Here was an opportunity the Shah had been waiting for. He replied in the manner of saints and seers, invoking on Muhammad Shah and the Queen the benedictions of Providence, and telling them in exquisite words chosen from the sacred books of Persia and Turkey that "those who serve and have faith in God are the images of God on earth, nay, gods themselves".

The Shah suggested that "it would be more propitious if the royal couple chose to set their eyes on this reader of the nature's book of secrets before sunrise and before the purity of the night's sleep is in any way polluted by the intake of food".

The audience was fixed for a *ghari* before sunrise on Friday, 22 September 1723. What transpired at the meeting no one knows. What is,

however, recorded history is that for the next twelve years Shah Ghaffur enjoyed free access to the Emperor's private apartment at any hour of the day or night. His influence in the palace, as also at the court, became the envy of the high and low. The ladies, in particular Koki Jiu, made no secret of their implicit faith in the word of the Shah. They, in fact, worshipped him as "divinity in flesh and bones", and nothing was ever done by them without first seeking his approval.

The result was a catastrophe. Hindustan, it seemed, became the personal property of this "wolf in the garbs of a saint". The historian Shoab estimated that his income, in addition to massive bribes and gifts of gold and precious stones, was over rupees fifty thousand a day. His wayward son, Abdur Rahim, was raised to the rank of six thousand, and his only occupation was to preside every evening at bacchanalia abounding in wines and women of the choicest vintage.

The Shah's daughter, Nasreen, was more shameless. She sang the most lewd songs and danced the most perverse dances with the abandon of a professional trader in sensuality. Her father knew about these orgies of unchaste, voluptuous behaviour, but he condoned them as "expressions of the spirit of creation". One day he himself went with a diamond rosary in one hand and a book of prayers in the other, to witness Nasreen "do homage to the light that illuminates her body and soul". He left after the first act. The *tasbih* dropped from his hand. Nasreen did not see the softly-lit lamps of another evening. She was reported to have died the next day of a snake bite.

The days of Shah Ghaffur's influence were gradually coming to an end. The climax came when Abdur Rahim proclaimed his "irrepressible love" for the Emperor's mistress, Nur Bai, and carried her away to a pleasure-house at the outskirts of Agra. Muhammad Shah was shocked at this act of "disloyal treachery", and he ordered that Abdur Rahim be brought to his presence, dead or alive, within seven days. Shah Ghaffur, his wife and daughter were arrested and lodged in the fort prison. All his properties were confiscated and wealth seized. Charges of corruption and fraud were formulated against him. Abdur Rahim was brought to Delhi on the fourth day. His nose and tongue were ordered to be cut. A solitary dark dungeon was assigned to him in the prison. All his women were disfigured and allowed to find their asylums. The Shah charisma was over.

The many non-Muslim devotees of the Shah paid over ten million rupees in fine for their collusion in the frauds committed by Abdul Ghaffur. Requests by the Shah for his release were turned down with

contempt. In May 1735, he and all his family members were transferred to the prison in Rohtas fort in Bihar. A year later he died following a short illness. It is said that when his end was near, he mustered all his failing strength to hurl abuse at God for "raising to the throne a witless ass like Muhammad Shah, and letting the spiritual supermen like himself die in unmerited ignominy." The fort commander cut his tongue and threw it to dogs for a meal. He died not long afterwards.

By 1736, the so-called inner circle of Muhammad Shah's friends and favourites had lost its wheeling gear. In fact, the process of disintegration began in 1734 with the fall from grace of Koki Jiu following her split with Malika-i-Dauran. The latter asked her one day to reveal the whereabouts of her hidden wealth. Koki went into a fit of temper, locked her apartment, and rushed out, never to return to the palace again. The Emperor did not send out scouts to search for her. He did not wish to harm her in any way. Neither did he intend to continue to play the second fiddle to her any longer. Her friends and relatives were proved to be infinitely corrupt.

The wealth she was reported to have accumulated through her agents was larger than "the treasures of Harun-ul-Rashid". Both Nawab Qudsiya and Malika-i-Dauran had complained to the Emperor of "the arrogant and disrespectful behaviour of this wily, deceitful woman". In fact, it was at the instance of Muhammad Shah that the Queen asked Koki the question that led to the final break.

With her departure, the Koki junta withered away. Shoab described her eclipse as "the biggest all-time flop", and said that the unthinkable had come to pass so suddenly as to leave everybody aghast. She was a cunning concubine. Her sins were old, her methods older. Even a blockhead like Muhammad Shah did not fail to discern the guile in her character. She was a very avaricious woman, and avarice, according to Shaikh Saadi, is a coal that must be cooled if the house is to be saved from going up in a blaze. Commenting on the fate that ultimately befell her, the historian Jalal-ud-Din Ahmad observed: "Every sin causes more injury to one that does it than the one that suffers it". How true!

There is no sin where there is no law. In the first twelve years of Muhammad Shah's reign, the sin became virtue, and virtue sin. As has been said earlier, the traditional religious and ethical values were mocked at as something outdated, unworthy of acceptance as the means of self-fulfilment. The courtiers, as also the common men, rose by sin, and they all made fortunes by practices frowned upon as ungodly not long ago. This state of lawlessness bred confusion, and that prevalence of

near-chaos could not but be an invitation to the adventurist guerillas spread all over northern India.

Gujarat, Bundelkhand and Malwa were already writhing in agony at the devastation caused by Maharatta plunderers. The hawk-eyed Baji Rao was waiting in Malwa for an opportunity to descend on Delhi, and thus prove the vulnerability of Mughal defences. The Rajputs of Udaipur and Jodhpur, however, stood menacingly in his way. A master of strategy, Baji Rao decided to move forward step by a careful step, making sure the enemy did not attack him from the rear. To that end, he first subjugated Indore with the help of Malhar Rao Holkar and then Gwalior through a daring assault by his deputy commander, Ramuji Scindia. Nearly ten thousand men were stationed at these two bases before he pushed on to Ajmer.

This *putsch* alarmed Muhammad Shah who ordered Khan-i-Dauran to take steps to check the Maharatta advance. The Khan proceeded towards Ajmer slowly, devising perhaps ways as he marched how best to avoid joining battle with the fast-moving Maharatta columns. Baji Rao too did not wish to take the risk of a setback at the hands of the larger Mughal army. He, therefore, staged an orderly retreat to Deccan through Malwa, plundering as he went and taking with him as much loot as he could lay his hands upon. The Maharatta manoeuvre to keep the enemy guessing was made more puzzling by the threatening postures of the Holkar-Scindia armies.

After the rainy season (1734-35) Baji Rao returned with more men, more materials, and more designs in his head how best to demolish the morale of the imperial forces. Muhammad Shah this time raised two equally big armies, one under Vizir Qamar-ud-Din and the other under Khan-i-Dauran. Both were, however, reluctant marchers for different reasons. Qamar-ud-Din, whose weakness for wine and women out-stripped his martial virtues, progressed leisurely in the manner of a Jahangir going to Kashmir for a holiday. He covered thirty miles in twenty days, a record in slow-pace that made even Muhammad Shah sit up in surprise.

On the other hand, Khan-i-Dauran dragged his feet because of his long-standing, secret hostility for Qamar-ud-Din; he wanted the Vizir to bear the brunt of Maharatta attack, and thereafter to trap Baji Rao by an encircling movement. Once again, Baji Rao turned out to be more than a match for the imperial commanders. He veered right and, bypassing both armies, carried fire and sword through the Doab and plundered (1737) territories close to Agra. The Emperor was helpless in the face of

these devastating hit-and-run attacks, and he promptly conceded most of the demands put forth by the Peshwa. By virtue of these concessions, mostly in Rajasthan, the Maharattas collected taxes and stationed their troops in specified areas, the holy city of Ajmer being one of them.

The next year (1737-38) the tide turned against the Maharattas. The Governor of Oudh, Saadat Khan, inflicted crippling blows against the elusive Deccani horsemen, and captured many Maharatta captains and senior commanders. The historian Rustam Ali gives a colourful account of the successes of Saadat Khan's commandos. He wrote:

The imperial forces outplayed the Maharattas at their own game. They encircled their pockets, set fire to their tents and property, looted their treasure, and put to the sword hundreds of them whenever an opportunity came their way to join battle with the enemy columns. Scores of Maharatta chiefs were taken into custody and sent to Delhi as trophies of war. Baji Rao himself was hard put to it to escape the net that was fast closing in on him. He somehow managed to escape capture, taking refuge for days in temples and out-of-the-way inns and mango orchards. At one place near Muttra, he eluded the enemy by riding a donkey in the garb of a brick-layer. There were stories current all over Oudh of Baji Rao's hide-and-seek exploits against the Mughals. That he managed in the end to flee towards Delhi was a testimony to his cunning and pluck.

Some bards believed that Baji Rao was in league with ghosts and spirits. Others felt that the gods of air and water were helping him to get out of difficult situations. Some called him an angel, others a devil. Whatever he might have been, the fact remained that the hounds of Saadat Khan failed to set their teeth upon him. His appearance in Delhi shortly afterwards was a miracle of daredevilry. He gave a terrible fright to Muhammad Shah and his commanders. His purpose seemed to be to show that Saadat Khan's reports of his victories were exaggerations divorced from truth and reality. The setbacks suffered by him were not defeats. The Maharatta army was intact and in good heart.

The speed and stamina of Baji Rao were the despair of Mughal generals. Covering nearly two hundred miles in three days, the Peshwa planted his flag at Kalkaji, six miles from Delhi, on the Id day, 9 April 1737, and announced by the beat of drum that he intended to launch a massive attack on Delhi the next day. Panic spread like wild fire all over the capital. Muhammad Shah made plans to flee the city, and take refuge in the hill fortress near Kangra. Emergency meetings were held with the top

civil and military officials, but no decisive plan of action could be evolved to checkmate the Peshwa.

At nightfall, Baji Rao advanced to Talkatora grove, known then as Mahmudabad, and he was happily surprised to find the suburbs of Delhi totally undefended. The capital was at his mercy. In a bid to capture Delhi without bloodshed, Baji Rao sent a letter to the Emperor by the hand of a godly man who had lived in the grove for many years as its unofficial caretaker. His son, Manzoor, went with him. According to Shoab, the communication sent by Baji Rao was a well-worded plea for restraint and peace. He wrote:

Despite Saadat, despite Qamar-ud-Din, and despite Khan-i-Dauran, I am here, a few undefended miles from the seat of imperial Government. It will be utterly useless for Your Majesty at this stage to try to check my progress. The troops at my command are loyal and brave. Their morale is as high as the sky. If I let them go, they will take the capital in one stride. Battles and bloodshed are only evil necessities. I am loath to inflict misery on the people of this ancient city. Let us meet at a neutral rendezvous, and work out a peaceful settlement of the discord that has marked the Maharatta-Mughal relations for nearly three-quarters of a century. If no reply is received to this suggestion by mid-day tomorrow, the great Lord will hold you responsible for the consequences. This is not a threat, but only an honest statement of reality.

Muhammad Shah discussed this letter with a team of advisors. The consensus was that the Peshwa should be invited to have an audience with the Emperor in the fort. A reply was accordingly sent to Baji Rao, asking him to "shed fear and come to the fort accompanied by not more than five unarmed counsellors and have the honour of submitting your case personally to the benign Monarch".

Baji Rao had not come all the way to Delhi to "walk straight into the lion's den" without asking for suitable guarantees of safety. Meanwhile, a few brave-hearts at the court prevailed upon Muhammad Shah to face the challenge courageously, and not to be cowed down by Baji Rao's bluff. The demand for guarantee was, accordingly, turned down with a show of contempt. "We are ready to fight your army", wrote Amir Khan in a manner befitting the commander of fifteen thousand well-equipped troops. The fat was in the fire. Baji Rao reacted wildly to this diplomatic affront. He launched a massive attack on the city early next day.

The fighting that followed was grim and relentless. Over a thousand

Mughal soldiers lay dead in the streets before the sun began its daily climb-down to the west. Among the dead was the young, ambitious Mir Hassan Khan who joined forces with Amir Khan of his own accord. He fought recklessly for nearly two hours before falling to a sword-blow by a cousin of Baji Rao. The heaviest fighting took place in the Paharganj area. The shrieks of the dying and the wounded could be heard for miles around. The city was in the grip of infinite fear. The Emperor and his entourage were ready to quit in the event of Baji Rao entering the city through the Delhi Gate.

At this stage a near-miracle came to pass. Baji Rao fled the city with a band of five hundred Maharatta soldiers. Perhaps the news reached him that the army of Qamar-ud-Din Khan had entered the eastern outskirts of Delhi after covering very rough one hundred miles in two days. The realization perhaps dawned upon him that he could not beat two armies with courage alone. From all accounts, it appears that the Peshwa left unscathed. He is known to have stopped for a while at Serai Allahwadi Khan for rest. The thought of pursuit by imperial troops haunted him. His fears did not come true. The army of Amir Khan was in complete disarray, almost on the brink of breaking up into uncoordinated parts. Amir Khan was relieved no end at the news of Maharatta withdrawal. His decision not to send out pursuit parties was a measure of his helplessness, not the outcome of any tactical considerations.

Qamar-ud-Din Khan was also in a similar predicament. His army was in a state of extreme exhaustion, and to ask any part of it to go in hot pursuit of the fast-moving Maharatta force would have been to ask for trouble. The circumstances thus helped Baji Rao. As he sped into the sands of Rajasthan, he looked back time and again over his shoulders to scan the horizon for the red and blue of imperial columns, but in vain. Relieved, he quickened his pace and reached Ajmer via Narnol in less than a week. From there he proceeded to Deccan through Malwa — a pitiable commentary on the Mughal preparedness to block his passage in territories which belonged to them by the right of overlordship. Shoab writes that at one stage of his flight southwards, Baji Rao contemplated recrossing into Doab for plunder, but the idea was abandoned because of the reported move by Nizam-ul-Mulk for intervention on the side of Muhammad Shah.

No monarch, howsoever wayward and foolish, can afford to be irresponsible when it is discovered that his aides are gutless narcissists unable either to govern effectively or to give the right advice. The Baji Rao incursion into Delhi disillusioned Muhammad Shah. He realized

that his team of counsellors and army commanders was a weak combination of mediocrities to whom self-interest came first and everything else afterwards. The Vizir Qamar-ud-Din Khan was a sinner in that he failed to prevent others from sinning. Khan-i-Dauran was a sinner in that other men's sins were before his eyes, and his own were behind his back. Jealousy blunted his vision and his spirit of adventure.

Whatever side he looked, Muhammad Shaw saw incompetence, opportunism and variations of disloyalty. Time had brought to light what had so far remained hidden from the ken of the Emperor. Muhammad Shah shared his thoughts with Nawab Qudsiya who, in the intuitive wisdom of a well-bred woman, guessed correctly that her son was intent upon inviting Nizam-ul-Mulk to take up once again the post of Prime Minister. She supported his plan notwithstanding that her favourite, Khan-i-Dauran, harboured ill-feelings towards the Nizam. The presence at the helm of affairs of a senior nobleman of high status was, she held, essential for maintenance of equilibrium among various factions and parties. Her support strengthened Muhammad Shah in the conviction that, despite his many faults, Nizam-ul-Mulk was the only man who could arrest the slide-down towards lawlessness.

Accordingly, a proclamation, reappointing Nizam-ul-Mulk as Vakil-i-Mulk, was sent to Burhanpur along with a letter written in the Emperor's own handwriting. Wrote Muhammad Shah:

Perhaps you have already received reports of the recent happenings in Delhi. The wily Peshwa all but toppled the Empire by a daring assault on the capital. We are beholden to the Almighty Allah for saving us from what could have been a catastrophe. Neither Qamar-ud-Din Khan nor Amir Khan was able to prevent the escape of the Peshwa. We feel that your presence here is essential if the Empire is to be saved from undergoing further political and military pressures at the hands of Maharattas and other lesser foes. High honours await you here. In the name of all that was dear to the great Alamgir Padshah, we urge you most sincerely to accept the offer and leave for Delhi without delay. You may entrust the Government of Deccan to a nobleman of your choice. A new Governor will be named in due course after consultation with you. We look forward to the satisfaction of having you seated on our right before the winter sets in.

Muhammad Shah's helplessness was for Nizam-ul-Mulk an opportunity he had been waiting for. He left Burhanpur on 27 April 1737, and reached

Delhi on 12 July. Seldom before had a Vizir travelled amidst such fanfare as did the Nizam on this occasion. Governors, Rajas and chieftains *en route* vied with one another in extending honours to the new Prime Minister. Very costly gifts were received by him from the Emperor at every stage. Prayers for the Nizam were held in cities through which he passed. Qamar-ud-Din Khan went out to receive him three stages from Delhi. The imperial bodyguard, in full regalia, took over the security duties before Nizam-ul-Mulk entered the capital from the Delhi Gate.

Trumpets were sounded and drums beaten as the Nizam, seated on a magnificent elephant, made his way to the fort. The streets were lined on both sides by thousands of men wishing to have a look at the new Vizir. All grace and affability, the Turani nobleman acknowledged the greetings of the population with touching humility. Often he raised his hands skywards to underline his obedience to God's will. At a point near Chandni Chowk, he alighted from his mount to pray for a while under what Shoab called the shadow of the great mosque. The crowds followed his example, and when the Nizam remounted the elephant, a deafening cry of Allah-i-Akbar went up. The Nizam stood up in the gold howdah and bowed low repeatedly in submission to the Almighty.

The progress therefrom to the palace was slow. The crowds jam-packed the narrow passage to the centre of the citadel. About half a furlong from the hall of audience, the Nizam and Qamar-ud-Din Khan walked hand-in-hand to the outer gate. There they were received with traditional Oriental courtesies by Khan-i-Dauran and four other senior dignitaries. The assembled noblemen inside the hall bowed their heads as Nizam-ul-Mulk, a picture of serene dignity, walked up to the throne and did the prescribed obeisance. Muhammad Shah, after performing the ritual of saying a few words of welcome, stepped down the famed Peacock pedestal, placed his right hand on the Nizam's shoulder and, speaking in chaste Persian, said: "Allah wanted that we entrust the affairs of the Empire to your safe hands. We are all instruments of His will".

Then the Emperor beckoned to the Chamberlain who came up with a diamond-studded silver tray on which were placed the three pieces of the highest class of robes of honour and a gold-bordered scroll of paper on which were inscribed the words. "To Asaf Jah, pillar of the Empire, guardian of the faithful, friend of the poor, Vakil-i-Mulk*, protector of peace and justice". The new title (Asaf Jah) given to Nizam-ul-Mulk

*Vakil-i-Mulk was a new post created specially for Nizam-ul-Mulk; it ranked higher than the post of Vizir. Qamar-ud-Din Khan continued to hold charge of the post of Vizir.

carried with it the rights and privileges, as also material benefits, equivalent to those enjoyed by the royal princes. The mansion of Asadullah Khan was allotted to him for residence, and food was sent to him five times a day from the royal kitchen. A hundred slave-girls were assigned to the mansion for service.

A royal proclamation issued the same day expressed the Emperor's "great satisfaction" at the return of Nizam-ul-Mulk to hold once again the high responsibilities he had held previously with "devotion, distinction and supreme steadfastness of purpose".

The wheel had come full circle. Nizam-ul-Mulk took for another term the seat on the right of the throne. His stock was high, his fame higher. Muhammad Shah gained a new image. He had shown the courage to own a mistake — an act of self-effacement that won him plaudits all around. The times demanded reconciliation at the highest level. Nadir Shah was threatening at the door in the west. Baji Rao was also planning another assault on northern India. The task before Asaf Jah was not easy. In Mughal times, the post of Vakil-i-Mulk was never a bed of roses. Nizam-ul-Mulk was more than a mere Vizir; he was in fact a regent plenipotentiary. This assignment carried within it more trouble than what met the eye.

Invasion by Nadir Shah

Chapter 19

UP AGAINST MAN AND GOD

THE grey-bearded Asaf Jah took charge of the post of Vakil-i-Mulk in the middle of July 1737. Nearly sixteen months earlier, on 26 February 1736, there came to the throne of Persia a man who shone like a meteor streaming across the sky of Central Asia. He was Nadir Quli, a native of Khorasan, whom Providence chose to oust the Afghans and restore Persia to its Safvi glory. The seven-year foreign rule in Persia was a horror in that over a million people perished because of scarcities resulting from the systematic plunderings of loot-hungry Afghan tribesmen. There was no law, hence nothing sinful, in the land of the once powerful Shah Abbas*. There was no respect left either for life, property or honour. Deliverance from the Afghans made Nadir a national hero, one worthy of respect and support from all sections of the people.

This upsurge of adulation could not but spark in Nadir the ambition to gather more fame by settling some old scores with Turkey, Russia, Afghan chiefs and the smaller Central Asian principalities. The military successes achieved by him were spectacular.

The whole of Transoxiana came under his sway. Nadir was no ordinary conqueror. He trampled underfoot all fears, and went out to wreck vengeance on all those who, in his reckoning, had in any way sullied the Persian prestige. In medieval times, armed successes were the most charismatic of youthful accomplishments. Nadir became a legend early in life. His name became a synonym for courage, pluck, ruthlessness and invincibility. A man of common understanding can by proper

*Shah Abbas the Great died in the middle of the seventeenth century. Thereafter the Safvi dynasty, founded by Shah Ismail in the sixteenth century, declined gradually in prestige and influence. The last Safvi king of Persia, Shah Hussain, reigned from 1694 to 1722. Ever since Abbas conquered Qandhar, a province of Afghanistan, in the seventeenth century, the Indo-Persian relations had come under much strain. Nadir Quli rescued Persia from the Afghans with the help of Hussain's son, Tahmasp.

care, application and labour make himself whatever he pleases except a dreaded conqueror.

Nadirs and Timurs are, so to say, born with spears in their hands and blueprints of conquests in their heads. They are such rarities as cannot be explained away either in terms of heritage, training or upbringing. Perhaps they are products of uncommon circumstances, uncommon yearnings of the life-force they are endowed with. Some such men become the conquerors of the lusts within, others plunderers of the wealth without. Nadir belonged to the latter category. His ambition directed his way; God, it seemed, had no hand in the miseries caused by his exercises in self-aggrandisement. And let it be said that out of the travails of others, Nadir strove to find the means for the good of the people of Persia. He was primarily a ruthless despot to whom the means meant nothing, the end everything. Shivaji, Baji Rao and Aurangzeb were, in a lesser way, cast in the self-same mould. The Middle Ages spawned many a heartless, over-ambitious man of the sword who sought self-fulfilment in destroying by brute force all opposition to his will.

Nadir was the progeny of poverty. His father, Imam Quli, a poor Turkman, earned his living by making garments of sheepskin. In childhood, Nadir had often to go to sleep at night without food—a state of penury that aroused in him the irrepressible urge to secure by plunder what his God-fearing father could not secure by honest means. The times were ripe for the type of bold adventurism he chose as his profession. In the rough and tumble of a life of brigandage, he was carried away by Uzbeg raiders to Turkey where he spent a little less than four years in the prison at Istambul—a period of destitution and despair that rid him of God-fear and other pulls that restrain man from taking to the life of a freebooter.

The die was cast. On return home, he collected around him a band of rough-neck gangsters, and embarked on a plan of pillage that in due time developed into an open war of wiles against the affluent and the rich. The capture of the fort of Kalat in 1708, when Nadir was twenty years of age, was the first big step on his way to becoming the dreaded ruler of Persia and the adjacent independent and semi-independent kingdoms.

Following the resignation of Shah Hussain in 1772, Persia in stages became virtually the real estate of the Afghans. Hussain's son, Tahmasp, was helpless against the terror the Afghans spread everywhere. Here was an opportunity for Nadir to make virtue of his exercises in lawlessness. With a view to "liberate" Persia from the Afghans, he made a common cause with Tahmasp, and he succeeded in redeeming his pledge to

"cleanse the Persian soil of the Afghan abomination within two years". In gratitude, Tahmasp gave Nadir nearly one-half of the kingdom for governance and to secure material benefits therefrom. Nadir was on the verge of becoming the king of Persia. Three years later, the voluptuary Tahmasp was deposed and his eight-month-old son was seated on the throne with Nadir as regent in full control of the affairs of the kingdom. Four years later, the infant king died in mysterious circumstances, and Nadir "in deference to the pleas of senior commanders", ascended the throne in the title of Shah-in-Shah.

For Nadir the acquisition of power had only two justifications: To get what he could, and to keep what he had. Without waiting for a reply to his demand made in a communication sent by the hand of a special envoy, Yusuf-ul-Mulk, he marched westwards at the head of an army of fifty thousand men and ten thousand horse. His aim was to capture from Turkey the two provinces — Armenia and Georgia — which at one time formed part of Persia. The expedition gained its objective without much fighting. The Turkish Governors surrendered unconditionally on assurances of reward and honourable treatment.

Nadir never hesitated to use bribery as a weapon in his scheme of operations, and he made no scruple of declaring it "to be more effective and less costly than the arms that spread fire and death". No man was ever yet a great commander without being a provocative philosopher. Nadir enjoyed a fair degree of facility in summing up his views on war and peace in telling, pragmatic words. He revelled in the spirit of aggression that surged within him. His famous saying that "the heartless pleasures are the fondest and the most lasting" is a revealing expression of his approach to life. Words too were his weaponry, and he used them to good advantage. Kindly silence was, to him, the refuge of the coward, and the pride only of those men who were more dead than alive.

Some of Nadir's pronouncements were perhaps rooted in the travails of his childhood, a surmise that is of a piece with the Hegelian formulation that the sword grew bright and sharp in the soil made rich by the tears of hunger. Nadir was a ruthless warrior. He was also a fearsome thinker. The experiences of childhood fashioned his sword as also his tongue. He was at daggers drawn with man and God. His war was total, and it admitted of no compromise. He withdrew from Turkey only after getting what he wanted to possess.

Thereafter, Nadir veered towards the Caspian with the avowed declaration that he would not rest content until all the provinces bordering that sea were reamalgamated into the Persian empire. The Russian

rulers recognised the futility of arguing Nadir out of his resolve, and they quickly offered terms for an honourable peace. Nadir was concerned only with his own honour, not that of others. He to himself was dearer than the dearest foe. He told the Russian emissary in plain words that "my honour is more valuable to me than the honour of anyone else", and he insisted upon the return of the disputed territories to Persia as the irreducible price for peace. Russia accepted the demand, and a treaty of peace was signed in April 1737.

Persia was rapidly coming into its own. There was a new respect for its arms, a new consideration for its ruler. Nadir's prestige had arisen sky-high within a short span of fourteen months. The neighbouring kings dreaded the sound of the footsteps of his marching troops. The capture of Bahrain by Arabia some years ago was a dispute that, to Nadir, admitted of only one solution: Bahrain must return to the fold of Persia. The Arabs at the time were too weak to resist Nadir's demand. They moved out hurriedly when a sternly-worded ultimatum was received from Nadir towards the end of the year. The Persian image thus gathered an extra fearsome form; it was recognised to be the most powerful state in Central Asia, ready to use its lethal war machinery in support of its claims. Nadir enjoyed revenge, and he exulted over the ruins he could scatter.

Revenge, to Nadir, was a debt in the payment of which he was honest and punctual. Qandhar rankled in his heart. The Persian honour, he said time and again, could not be redeemed fully for as long as that principality remained a part of Indian Afghanistan. After having made secure his western flank, he embarked on a sweep to the east at the head of nearly a hundred thousand ferocious men. Resistance to this highly purposive armed force was out of the question. The fort of Qandhar fell on 12 March 1738. The Governor and his entourage fled to Kabul. Nadir thus came into direct conflict with the Empire of the Mughals.

Muhammad Shah was too stupid to realize the full significance of Nadir's advance. Neither was there at the court of Delhi any nobleman farsighted enough to warn the Emperor of the gathering storm. Asaf Jah was too old and too self-centred to be able to apply his mind to reckoning the consequences of the fall of Qandhar. The Khan-i-Dauran was busy, like a rabbit, in fondling his own harmless face. Qandhar and Kabul were too distant to stir him out of his complacency. Muhammad Shah trusted him more than he did Nizam-ul-Mulk or any other nobleman. As leader of the Hindustani faction at the court, the Khan was indifferent to the material requirements of the Governors and military commanders in the north-west. The latter belonged, by and large, to the Turani party.

Inter-party jealousies and intrigues retarded effective action at nearly every level, and there was a general consensus among historians that the Khan, in this context, was the villain of the piece. The Prime Minister, Qamar-ud-Din Khan, cousin of Asaf Jah, clutched always to what is called the summer side of doubt. This is a good trait of character in a common man, but not in the head of government faced with a crisis. The court was riddled with personal animosities, jealousies and family feuds —a circumstance that warranted at the head of affairs a man that trusted nobody. The pleasure-seeker Qamar-ud-Din was not cut out for the challenging tasks at hand. He had two primal passions: to flatter and to be flattered. He had thus little time for objective analyses of the fast-emerging ugly realities.

The other two big-wigs of the nobility, Khwaja Qasim and Saadat Khan, followed loyalty even to the fire, but avoiding the fire if possible. They looked up to Asaf Jah for support and guidance, and thus became, willy-nilly, involved in the horse-trading for civil and military honours. They were, however, comparatively steadfast in carrying out the wishes of the Emperor but, alas, Muhammad Shah seldom expressed a wish that, directly or indirectly, did not relate to the satisfaction of his wanton appetites. The Emperor himself lacked the imagination to understand correctly the import of Nadir's thrust eastwards.

It was apparent that Hindustan was on his card of conquests ever since Nadir adorned his head with the crown of Persia. His every subsequent move was a well-calculated step forward to emulating the exploits of Mahmud Ghaznavi and Amir Timur. The riches of Hindustan beckoned him. The plunderer in him could not but succumb to the temptation of filling his treasures with the hoarded wealth of the eight generations of Mughal monarchs. It is a sad commentary on the collective wisdom of the court in Delhi that it failed to perceive the all-important hidden motive of Nadir. The suspicion, therefore, is irresistible that the Turani junta were inwardly happy that a son of Khorasan was on his way to capturing the richest empire in the world. Their subsequent inaction lends support to this surmise. They were, to say the least, reluctant partners in the plan that in the end was adopted to check Persian aggression. Muhammad Shah failed to discern their extra-territorial loyalties, and he continued to believe all the time that the stewardship of the resistance campaign could not have been entrusted to men more loyal than Asaf Jah and Qamar-ud-Din. Here was a tragedy of unwarranted confidence that cost the Empire very heavily indeed.

Plunder, to Nadir, was a dish that should be eaten hot. From Qandhar he marched to Kabul without wasting any time in diplomatic niceties. However, he sent an envoy, Ali Mardan Khan Shumlu, to Delhi, via Sind, with a letter to Muhammad Shah, in which he recounted the compulsions that forced on him the decision to "neutralize Qandhar and Kabul in his campaign to establish peace in Central Asia". He wrote, dexterously mixing the expressions of friendship with notes of warning, a fairly exhaustive account of his motives, grievances and intentions. In parts, he stated:

Brother Muhammad Shah, let me begin by saying that we share a common heritage, common religious values, and common adherence to the principles of friendship and amity. The differences that have unfortunately arisen between us are, I believe, transitory. We should be able to resolve them, God willing, by discussion and in a spirit of mutual accommodation.

As I informed Your Majesty earlier, we were left with no alternative but to take Qandhar by force. The Afghans are our enemies, as they are of Hindustan. It is to our common interest that they should be kept in check, and prevented from creating trouble for our empires. As Your Majesty is no doubt aware, the Emperors Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jahan and Alamgir underwent untold hardships, besides suffering immense losses in men and money, to retain southern Afghanistan as part of the Mughal Empire. The Afghan tribesmen are friends of none, enemies of all.

After our conquest of the fort at Qandhar, thousands of Afghans found refuge in Kabul. This was a violation of the spirit of friendship that has hitherto marked the relations between our two Empires. The Governor at Kabul took no step to bar their entry into the city. In the circumstances, we are compelled to march to Kabul and extinguish the Afghan mischief there once and for all. I would, however, stress that our quarrel is not with Hindustan but with the Afghan trouble-makers.

Your Majesty's governors on the other side of the river Nil-Ab may now be instructed not to give asylum to the fleeing Afghans. Else, we would not be wrong in taking it as God's will that we take proper remedial steps in those territories as well. We are well aware of the hurdles in our way. But those who are out to obey the dictates of Allah are not daunted either by man-made or natural hazards. We are resolved to overcome our enemies at any cost. If in the process, we are forced to take to arms against Your Majesty's security forces, the blame will not lie on our shoulders.

Together, we may be able to defuse the Afghan menace quickly. Disunited, we may play into the hands of our common enemies with results that are not difficult to predict.

Once again, we stretch our hand of friendship in the hope that Your Majesty will grasp it. It will be appreciated greatly if our envoy is sent back without delay with assurances sought in this communication. Time is against us. We will not be able to wait indefinitely for a reply. Our resolve to punish our bitterest foes is firm. Your Majesty's cooperation will strengthen the bonds of amity existing between us. May Allah guide our footsteps to the right course.

Muhammad Shah's three vices — ignorance, ease, and peaceful sloth — vitiated the atmosphere in Delhi. Ali Mardan waited for days to be received in audience by the Emperor. The Vakil-i-Mulk and the Vizir were of the view that the Persians would be repulsed at Kabul and, if by any chance they happened to cross that barrier, they would find their doom in the passes of Afghanistan and the rivers of Punjab. The witless Emperor trusted their word, and he deemed it unnecessary either to receive Ali Mardan or to send a reply to Nadir's communication. This neglect and breach of diplomatic etiquette became for Nadir another reason to invade Hindustan, and thus wreak vengeance for the insulting behaviour of the Mughal king.

The Persian ruler had not forgotten that, in violation of traditional norms of courtesy, Muhammad Shah did not facilitate him on his ascending the throne of Persia. Neither had the Mughal ruler sent the usual message of greetings and good wishes to Shah Tahmasp II when he donned the crown after ousting (with Nadir's help) the Afghans from Persia. These rebuffs, individually and collectively, hurt Nadir's pride, and he waited impatiently for the moment when his forces would descend on the plains of Punjab and make the rulers of Hindustan dance to his pipes.

The opportunity Nadir waited for was now close at hand. Like a wounded tiger, he pounced upon North Afghanistan, captured Ghazni without a fight, and then hurried forth to lay siege to Kabul's Qila-Hissar. The resistance collapsed as Nadir's heavy artillery pounded the walls of the famed citadel. The formal surrender came after seven days. Nadir was unexpectedly kind to the garrison and kinder to the leading citizens of Kabul who came out to offer him their felicitations and the customary homage complete with gifts of gold and silver. Working to a set plan, Nadir waxed generous, distributed robes of honour to the visiting

dignitaries, assured them of peace and honour, announced liberal compensation to those who had suffered losses at the hand of his troops, and he offered inordinately high salaries to such Afghan soldiers as would join his army for the invasion of Hindustan.

The cat was thus out of the bag. Qandhar and Kabul were mere halting stations on the road to Delhi. The much-trumpeted "Afghan menace" was no more than reason's robe for treacherous intentions. The plunder lust possessed Nadir. The stories of treasures brought from across the river Sind by Timur and Mahmud fired his destructive urges. He was prepared to use any ploy, ranging from smiles to swivel guns, to indulge his penchant for pillage in a land famed the world over for its riches, "its temples of gold, its river of molten silver, and its sands of pearls and diamonds of the purest hue".

Nadir, it is said, saw in a dream in childhood the golden peaks of a mountain, on each of which was inscribed the word "Hind" in Persian script. This dream, it was believed, became to the Khorasan prodigy a command of God to seek his fortune across the Hindukush. Nadir would at times laugh loudly in sleep and utter the words, "I have done it, I have done it". Hind obsessed him. Perhaps it may not be wrong to say that Nadir's childhood torments became in length of time the elements of his loot-hungry self. He was at best a dreaded despot, and at worst a pitiless plunderer. He was a man hell-bent on avenging the fate that gave him birth in a poor home. His war was against God and all those who submitted to His will without protest. The reason for this confrontation lay perhaps in the hunger that often kept him awake and restless in chilly nights of Khorasan.

Kabul surrendered on 19 June. A few days later, there came to Nadir a communication from his envoy in Delhi. The picture of "apathy and indifference to my representations" that he drew turned Nadir's blood into liquid flame. Announcing his decision to invade Hindustan, he sent out many a brigade of scouts to gather information about the strength and disposition of enemy forces on either side of the Sind. Instructions were also sent to the envoy for "immediate return to Kabul with or without the Mughal Emperor's permission". The point was reached, he wrote, where considerations of honour demanded firm action. "We are left with no choice but to talk to Delhi in the language it understands best", Nadir scribbled in his own handwriting. The hazards on way to Delhi meant nothing to him. He was born to command, not to be insulted. The golden peaks called him. His answer was a "dutiful bow to the command of my soul". The stage was set for a war of attrition against Muhammad Shah.

At the instance of his principal counsellor, Tahmasp Khan, a strongly-worded letter was sent to the Mughal Emperor on 3 July, informing him of the "irrevocable decision of Shah-in-Shah Nadir Quli to cross the boundaries of Hindustan and seek redress for the damages suffered by the armed forces of Persia at the hands of the Hindustani agents in Kabul and Qandhar".

The communication told the Emperor plainly that the Mughal representatives at strategic points might be advised in their own interest that they would stand in the way of the Persian army at their own peril. "All resistance will be crushed underfoot ruthlessly", the letter ended.

A few days later, Nadir sent an envoy to the Mughal representative at Lahore, Zakriya Khan, son of Abul Samad Khan, with a communication informing him of the decision to march to Delhi through Punjab. Playing on his Turani antecedents, Nadir advised him "in the capacity of an elder brother" not to plan resistance to the Persian forces. "Cooperation with us", he hinted, "will be suitably rewarded"

The envoy was accompanied by some prominent Afghan citizens of Kabul and a Persian guard of five hundred men. The party was waylaid by Afghan tribesmen near Jalalabad. The envoy was killed, and the bodyguard dispersed with heavy losses. The citizens of Kabul were allowed to return to their homes. They escaped molestation at the intervention of one Mulla Manzoor who said: "They accompanied the envoy out of fear, not respect, of Nadir. Let them go back". The letter the envoy carried for Zakriya Khan was passed on to the Mughal representative at Attock, and from there it was sent to Delhi. It is said that Asaf Jah did not present this communication to the Emperor lest it brought a stigma of dual loyalties upon the Turani party. Neither the Persian nor Indian historians made any further comments on this incident. The suspicion, however, deepens that the Turani junta, headed by Asaf Jah, was secretly in collusion with the invaders.

The news of the envoy's murder infuriated Nadir. Submitting to his anger, he rushed out of Kabul* at the head of ten thousand crack Persian troops, stormed the fort of Jalalabad into submission on 7 September, put the garrison to the sword, and virtually set Jalalabad on fire. The general massacre he ordered ended only when there were no men left to be massacred. All young women of the city, including the wives and sisters

*Nadir stayed in Kabul for forty-five days. Then he left, on 19 July, for rest in the fertile hill areas. He marched out to Jalalabad after spending twenty-two days in the "cool and abundance" of the high-altitude region.

of the Governor, Nasir Khan*, were brought to the army camp and set free only when the carnal lusts of the Persians were satisfied.

According to the historian Ghulam Hussain, the city of Jalalabad had never before been a witness to such orgies of inhuman behaviour. The streets were littered with headless bodies of young and old Afghans, and against this gruesome background there arose occasionally the piteous groans of naked women looking out for a drink of water. The havoc that Nadir's troops wrought was appalling. The systematic destruction they spread in the homes and bazaars of this ancient trading centre of the north-west was a testimony to Nadir's motto: "If the enemy be hungry, snatch away whatever food he may happen to possess; if he be thirsty, poison all the wells he may have access to; if he cries out for help, set him at rest with a blow of the sword; show him no mercy, give him no quarter."

Like most sadistic individuals, Nadir flattered his ego with others' pain. He waxed unmixed happiness as reports came of killings and plundering by his troops. To his eldest son, Mirza Raza Quli, he told when the day was about to shut: "I am feeling fine. My soul is drunk with the blood of the enemy. No wine could have made me more cheerful. I can hear the angels sing in heaven. Let us rejoice. Our enemies will never rise again".

When at long last, Nadir gave the cease-killing signal, the city of Jalalabad writhed in deep agony, almost lifeless, silent, without hope. Even the wild beasts, whose staple food is death, were scared to come near the bleeding township. Nadir slept sweetly that night. He was in his element. For once the gods were vanquished. Vengeance delights in murder, and it seldom reaches the point of satiation. Nadir forgot, however, that vengeance does not live long unavenged. For the present, he had no time to hold dialogues with the spirit. The sword, and that alone, was his guide and philosopher. Even the shrieks of bedraggled women, plundered of their chastity and honour, failed to make any mark on his soul of steel.

In the morning, Nadir awoke fresh and fine, ordered his favourite big cup of black, Turkish coffee, and went out to inspect arrangements for Raza Quli Khan's crowning as Deputy Emperor of Persia. Jalalabad was forgotten. He had more pressing dates to keep with destiny.

*Nasir Khan, Governor of Kabul, lived in Peshawar for most part of the year. A poor administrator, his principal occupations were hunting and prayers. A Turani by descent, his mother was of Afghan origin.

Chapter 20

DAY OF DOOM

NADIR realized that the invasion of Hindustan might spread over many months, nay, many years. To keep the throne of Persia vacant for that length of time was considered inadvisable. Nadir decided, therefore, to create the post of Deputy Emperor, and entrust it to his eldest son. On 3 November, Raza Quli, a handsome youth of twenty-four went through the rituals of a crowning ceremony, received from the hands of his father a replica of the sword of Shah Abbas and a bejewelled dagger belonging originally to Shah Ismail. Gifts symbolic of the greatness of Persia and the magnitude of the responsibilities devolving upon him.

The function was attended, among others, by Raza's mother and ten other leading ladies of Nadir's harem. They all rained flowers upon him as he stepped down the throne, and prepared to leave for Kabul on the return journey home. Nadir's parting advice to his son was: "Trust nobody. Have faith in yourself. Act before you think".

It is generally not known that Nadir on this campaign carried with him a harem of one hundred eleven ladies of high lineage and accomplishments. Besides, the Persian army contained a brigade of six thousand "women soldiers who dressed like men, took part in all activities of the camp, shared sensitive duties with men, and supervised the preparation and service of food for the whole force".

The Persian official chronicler points out that during the entire campaign not a single case of promiscuity was brought to the notice of the Emperor. Nadir's orders were: The guilty party should be beheaded in public and his or her body nailed atop a pole for exhibition in all parts of the camp". Some Indian historians, however, thought differently. They felt the Persian innovation was a means to keep the army in good mental shape. That no complaint of depravity was made to the Supremo

did not establish that women in the force were not women and men not men. The best that could be said was that it was a disciplined force, mindful of the consequences of lechery. Animal passion laughs at prisons and poles.

Leaving Jalalabad under his younger son, Nasrullah Khan, Nadir set out for Peshawar on 6 November. Speed and mobility were Nadir's chiefest ploys for overcoming the handicap of numbers. Nasir Khan raised an army of twenty thousand Afghans, and he came out of Peshawar with a flourish to block the pass between Ali Masjid and Jamrud. Nadir's twelve thousand fleet-footed cavalry moved like lightning to strike down the defences of the Khaibar Pass on 15 November after covering sixty rough miles in less than six hours. Nasir Khan put up some resistance, but his belated effort was of no avail against what Ali Hassan called the Persian avalanche. The Governor was captured an hour after the engagement began*. The Afghan resistance collapsed within two hours, and the Persian ruler celebrated victory by erecting a sixty-foot high tower inlaid with five thousand heads of the fallen Afghan soldiers.

For twenty-four suspense-ridden days, Nadir luxuriated in the Governor's palace in Peshawar along with his three wives, eleven mistresses and an equal number of concubines. In mortal fear of their lives, the citizens of Peshawar sent to the palace their representatives with rich gifts and assurances of loyalty. Nadir refused to see any of them. Neither did he accept any gift. All the petitions and appeals were left with Tahmasp Khan who, it is understood, consigned them to fire as soon as the supplicators passed out of the palace gate. Nadir's instructions were, "Never say no, nor yes. Keep them guessing".

The only pleasant company, to Nadir, at this point of campaign, was his own self. All other men were quite dreadful. The ladies of the harem waited to be invited to his apartment: it was only once or twice a day that the call came for anyone to visit him. He was his own world for the time. He had, as it were, gone into *khilwat* in search of answers to questions that perhaps baffled him. Solitude, he once said, was the only balm for the soul of a conqueror. Being a proud egoist, nothing was more to him than himself. "Only fools consult others", he told Mulla Azmi when the latter suggested that consultations be held with senior commanders how best to tame the rebellious Afridis and Yusufzais. Nadir loved overmuch to hear his own advice, and it was seldom that he failed to implement it in letter and in spirit.

*Some historians affirm that Nasir Khan was asleep in bed while the battle was joined.

Self-will was, to Nadir, the very essence of courage on and off the battlefield. All his thoughts, he believed, were the gems of military wisdom. If anyone dared ask him the reason for a decision, he would stiffen his facial muscles and say, "Reason? That lies in my will". Further argument with him was unnecessary.

For reasons best known to him, Nadir spared Peshawar the fate that befell Jalalabad. Towards the end of his stay in the city, he invited some local chiefs and dignitaries to join his army and "accompany me to the capital of the Mughal king". None dared refuse the offer. These reluctant partners in the invasion of Delhi were perhaps hostages to insure peace after Nadir's departure. The date of departure from Peshawar — 12 December 1738 — was fixed with one eye on the progress of construction of a bridge over Sind at Attock, and the other on the envoy sent to Lahore for researches in the loyalty of the Governor, Zakriya Khan.

The advance column, under Agha Muhammad, was given marching orders only when the bridge was ready for the crossing, and a secret message was received from the Persian intelligence network in Punjab that "Zakriya Khan will resist only to surrender after a token fight". Nadir was an eighteenth century Hitler in that all his conquests were based, by and large, on the strength of his Fifth Column. His advance columns paved the ground, through spread of fear and destruction, for operations by the main army. Fire-footed horses and columns of trained camels with swivel guns on their backs gave Nadir's army the look of self-generating tornado, fearsome in punching power and relentless in its capacity to scatter ruin whatever way it turned. Nadir himself was invariably at the helm of his war machine, trusting nobody, self-willed, entrenched fully in the faith that he was invincible. All the commanders were commanders only by proxy when he was there. In short, Nadir was the sole directing hand of operations around him. Nothing escaped his notice. Big victories, he believed, were built on attention to small things. There is little denying that he was a military genius. All his sins arose from his virtues. This is perhaps the case with all men who are not cast in the common mould.

The entire strategy of the campaign ahead was perhaps evolved by Nadir during his twentyfour - day stay in Peshawar. Reports from the scouts who had infiltrated in all parts of Punjab and the adjoining territories were the material he used for completion of his home work. There came to be stored in his brain the location of bridges, fords, measurements of the depth and breadth of rivers at various points, dispositions and strength of enemy troops, direction and condition of

roads leading to Lahore, figures about the composition of population *en route* — in fact, every detail having a bearing on the conduct of operations was readily available to him. Nadir left nothing to chance. Once when Prime Minister Abdul Baqi Khan read out to him a report on the approaches to Lahore, Nadir snapped, "Nonsense, there is no mention here of the detour around Shahdra which joins up after seven miles with the path to the Governor's palace". The Vizir was dumbfounded. Nadir had in fact decided to take that long route after crossing the Ravi.

The crossing of the Sind at Attock was eventless. The bridge built by Persian engineers was strong and fairly spacious. As was his wont, Nadir was the last to step on the western bank and it was there that he made the famous remarks, "Muhammad Shah is beaten. There is nothing now between me and Delhi".

The river Chenab, known for its turbulence in all seasons, was crossed (8 January 1739) on foot near Wazirabad with little loss of life and baggage. Nadir was jubilant. Turning to his wife, Mahtab, he said, "We may come back here for a boat trip in the summer. The river is calm and the surrounding countryside scenic".

Here came the news that Zakriya Khan, with twelve thousand troops, was entrenched at the bridge of Shah Daula, and that reinforcements for this force were on their way from Lahore. At the instance of Nadir, a letter was sent to Zakriya Khan by Abdul Baqi Khan. The communication, inter alia, stated:

To block the way of the Shah-in-Shah is to ask for destruction. Your men will have no chance of victory against the Persian war-machine. This is no boastful claim, but a warning based in realities. To commit suicide is no bravery, neither is it an act of loyalty. We are keen to prevent avoidable bloodshed. You are, therefore, advised to lay down arms unconditionally. Your submission will please the Shah.

Ethnic affinity with the Persians is yet another strong reason for you to facilitate the passage of our forces to Lahore. Hindustanis are no friends of Turanis. To side with them against the Persian king is a sacrilege, an unpardonable wrong against your own race.

We shall not wait for your reply. Speed is the essence of this campaign. We hope you will have the wisdom to take the right decision.

Nadir marched out the next morning (10 January) towards the Shah Daula bridge but, after covering about two miles, veered right and took a long detour to bypass the imperial force and reach the eastern bank of

the Ravi in less than eight hours. The river was crossed, again on foot, and Nadir pitched his tents in the Shalimar Gardens before Zakriya Khan knew what had happened. The game was up. Nadir took Lahore without a fight. The Governor realized the hopelessness of his position, and he hastened to send Kaifayat Khan to offer submission.

On 12 January, Zakriya Khan himself came to the Persian camp, and he gave to the Shah the keys of the fort and a gift of twenty-one splendidly dressed war elephants "as a token of my obedience to the Shah-in-Shah". Nadir accepted the *nazrana* with a faint smile, and he asked the pale-faced Governor if he wished to ask for any special favour. "Spare the city of Lahore the fate that overtook Jalalabad", said Zakriya Khan in a voice as earnest as it was plaintive. The request pleased Nadir, and he there and then fixed rupees twelve hundred thousand as the price for grant of his prayer. Zakriya bowed agreement, and three days later (14 January) he presented Nadir the requisite amount of money.* Lahore heaved a sigh of relief. Nadir kept his word. No harm was done to the people of the city.

The rewards, honours and robes of distinction that Zakriya Khan received at the hands of the conqueror make one wonder if the surrender of Lahore was only a stage show for the writers of history. Zakriya Khan, a Khorasani by descent, had, according to some chroniclers, already indicated his readiness to lay down arms at the first opportune moment. Nadir knew about the Governor's plan of action, and it was not perhaps without Zakriya Khan's connivance that the Shah reached Shalimar while the Governor lay in wait for the invading force at the Daula Shah bridge! Loyalty sank to a new low in the post-Alamgir period. Factionalism destroyed all that was good in Mughal polity.

Nadir spent sixteen days in Lahore, working around the clock to strengthen the long lines of communication with Kabul and Persia, and to give final touches to strategy for subduing Delhi. On assurances of loyal and devoted service, Nasir Khan was released from detention and appointed Viceroy of Kabul and Afghanistan — a clever move to assuage the Afghans, and to drive a further wedge between the Turani and Hindustani parties at the Mughal court. High honours were conferred on the new Viceroy, and instructions were sent to Raza Quli Khan at Tehran that a sufficient number of Persian troops be sent to Afghanistan for service under Nasir Khan. Nadir aimed at establishing a dual command in the area as a precaution against rebellion. Nasir Khan was told to reside in Kabul, and not to visit Peshawar for more than thirty days in a year on

*Nearly half of this amount was taken out of the imperial treasury, and the balance contributed by the nobility.

one or two tours of duty to that city. Two sons of Nasir Khan were retained for service in the Persian camp — an arrangement that deceived nobody with regard to their real status as hostages. Similarly, a son of Zakriya Khan accompanied the invading army to Delhi when the Khan was left behind to look after the affairs of Punjab. Nadir trusted nobody, the least of all those who came to him via disloyalty to their master. "Once unfaithful, and always unfaithful", he told Nasrullah Khan in the course of a statement on the principles of administration.

A former Governor of Kashmir, Fakhr-ud-Daula, who lived in Lahore in distressing poverty, was restored to his previous position—a concession not to tender sentiments but to his belief that those who had been wronged by the Mughals would hesitate to do wrong to the Persians.

Having secured his northern and western flanks, Nadir made ready for the thrust eastwards. Before leaving Lahore, he sent to Muhammad Shah a communication on familiar lines, mixing warnings with justifications for his acts of the recent past. He wrote, in parts:

Brother Muhammad Shah, once again, let me affirm that we share a common heritage of race and religion. It is indeed unfortunate that the things should have come to a pass such as forced us to violate your boundaries. Your hostility to our action against the Afghans is the root cause of the schism. We are resolved to punish the Afghans and their supporters. The latter are our bitterest foes. They are also the enemies of Hindustan.

North Afghanistan, Kabul and Qandhar are now in our possession. The Punjab is also under our rule. We are poised to seize by force the territories from Lahore to Delhi. It is up to you now to avoid bloodshed and capitulate unconditionally. War is a necessary evil that we were forced to wage to protect our honour and interests. The damage suffered by us at the hands of your agents from Qandhar onwards is large in terms of money and prestige. We are willing to retrace our steps to Persia provided a suitable indemnity is paid and assurances are held out with regard to the status of Afghans as our common enemies.

The eyes of thousands of your subjects are now turned on you. Capitulate, and they will be safe. Resist, and their lives will be in jeopardy.

One last word — All those who submit will be treated with kindness. No one may be able to protect those who opt to tread the path of resistance. This is not a boastful bluster, but a calculated understatement of the fate in store for our enemies.

Nadir expected no reply to this stern note. Already, large contingents of Persian soldiery were far advanced into Punjab, scattering ruin in the cities of Wazirabad, Gujarat, Yamunabad and Jullundur. The towns and villages that lay on their route were reduced to ashes. The havoc they wrought was beyond description. At Gujarat, a saintly man of near seventy, Nizam-ud-Din, was so appalled by the butchery that, in the manner of the ancient seers, he gathered up his feet into the half-torn bed and yielded up the ghost. Many young women jumped into wells to save their honour. A few braves who chose to resist the "Persian wolves" were hacked to pieces without a thought, and their limbs were consigned to fires raging all around.

At Jullundur, one Imam Baksh, known for his wisdom and purity of heart, sought refuge in the death of the righteous when his eyes fell on a band of armed men divesting an old, grey-haired lady of her foot and hand ornaments: He fell on the plunderers with "Ya Ali" on his lips, but only to be stabbed to death before making any headway in his mission of mercy.

The writings of Anand Ram and Tilak Dass, two contemporary news-writers of Gujarat, are replete with first-hand accounts of the "savageries of Nadir's hounds", and in the end the former wondered "if the hour of departure of man from this planet had finally come" The comparatively young Tilak Dass walked virtually through the valley of the shadow of death to see for himself the barbarities committed by the invaders. Written in Persian, the narratives of these two historians bear the imprint of authenticity. The destruction, wrote Tilak Dass, was to be seen to be believed. Grief and disbelief sat on his eyelids as he passed away a few months later of a wound received at the hands of a plunderer.

It was on 26 January 1739, that Nadir marched out of Lahore. The force he led comprised some of the crack Persian divisions of infantry, cavalry and artillery mounted on camels. The troops were in high spirits.The prospect of unlimited loot rubbed off all fear from their hearts. They regarded themselves as men of destiny. God had chosen them, they believed most fervently, to punish the enemies of Persia. They were unwilling to die, but they cared not if they fell in the fight. It was their conviction that Shah-in-Shah Nadir Quli Khan was born to conquer, not to suffer defeat on the battlefield. The reality of distance from the homeland was for the time lost in the glow of riches waiting to fall into their laps.

As was his wont, Nadir set a fast pace right from the first day. Slow march was not of a piece with his concept of war. His thoughts and his

actions were, so to say, in competition with one another for supremacy. Nadir sought to maintain a balance between the two, but it was not unoften that the reckless in him got the better of the careful. Like most despots, he believed that God was his friend; hence arose the conviction of the invincibility of his arms. Nadir seldom asked for a boon of the gods; he went for what he desired, and got it.

At Sirhind, Nadir came to know that the Mughal forces, numbering more than a hundred thousand*, had dug trenches eighty miles away at Karnal, a flourishing trade centre about seventy miles north of Delhi. Muhammad Shah himself was reported to be supervising the building of fortifications around his camp. Asaf Jah, Qamar-ud-Din and Khan-i-Dauran were in command of their respective forces. The impression thus was inescapable that there were four armies in the field, not one. This division in unity pleased Nadir. He increased his speed. "Let us hurry, and catch them quarrelling among themselves", he told Tahmasp Khan.

Obedience to his wish, as always, was instantaneous. The one hundred fifty thousand men at his command thrust forward in battle formation at a fierce pace. Ambala was reached in twelve hours. The royal harem and heavy baggage were left in that city and, after a day's rest, Nadir moved out towards Karnal on 9 February. He took with him a force of six thousand fleet-footed cavalry, his apparent plan being to survey himself the countryside near Karnal, and work out a strategy for action before the main force joined him a day or two later. His daring was inspiring, and his speed breath-taking. Skirting Shahbad and Thanesar, Nadir drew rein at Serai Azimabad, twelve miles from Karnal.

The prey was now within his reach. The first thing he did was to go up a hillock nearby, and scan the territory for its suitability to the type of action he had in mind. He shared his thoughts with none, and took no step that might indicate the strategy he planned to pursue. His hawk-like eyes missed nothing, and when he ordered the tents to be pitched at a slightly raised ground, it was obvious that he intended to wait there for the Mughals to commit the indiscretion of coming out of their trenches and giving him battle at a place of his choice. The vital wait began on 11 February.

*Accounts of the size of the Mughal army vary. British historians put the figure at 300,000, with 2,000 elephants and 3,000 pieces of artillery. Anand Ram estimated the strength of the army to be between 75,000 and 50,000. Rajput chroniclers put the figure at 150,000. All are unanimous that the circumference of the imperial army camp at Karnal was nearly twelve miles including the camp-followers, non-combatants, and inmates of the harems of Muhammad Shah and noblemen. The population of the camp exceeded a million.

The estimated manpower of the Mughal force ranged between three hundred thousand to sixty thousand. Its size, as also its two thousand war elephants, turned out in the end to be its biggest handicaps. Muhammad Shah* was too inefficient to manage such a large concourse of hastily assembled mercenaries. And the three principal commanders — Asaf Jah, Qamar-ud-Din and Khan-i-Dauran — were too suspicious of each other to be able to inject in the campaign either urgency or high purpose. The Emperor's favourite, Khan-i-Dauran, sought help "in this grave hour of crisis" from Raja Jai Singh as also from Baji Rao — a move that could not but arouse further distrust in the hearts of the Turanis.

For three months after receiving the news of the fall of Kabul, neither Muhammad Shah nor any of the senior noblemen bestirred himself to make plans to check the Persian advance. The inexperienced Emperor's chiefest enemies were the noblemen of his own court. Sloth and self-interest hatched in them ills that had in all ages been the cause of the fall of Empires. They were fellow-travellers in apathy to the welfare of the state.

The state of the imperial army as Nadir Shah looked at it from a distance of twelve miles, was pitiable indeed. Here was a vast assemblage of men without a soul. From whatever angle one looked at it, its fate seemed sealed. Nadir did not cross the Hindukush to be pushed back by a band of purposeless boasters. Muhammad Shah pinned his fading hopes on the thirty thousand battle-tested Afghans of Saadat Khan. The latter was on his way to Karnal from Oudh, in response to an urgent message from Delhi. His loyalty was not in doubt. The despair of Baji Rao, he had come to be known as the toughest general of the time. His arrival at Karnal at midnight on 12 February was seen by Muhammad Shah as a guarantee of victory against the Persians.

The Khan came for an audience with the Emperor in his travel armour. Asaf Jah and Khan-i-Dauran accompanied him to the royal tent. Hardly had the veteran soldier completed the ritual of doing obeisance to the monarch that there came the news of Persian roving scouts having carried away five hundred of his loaded camels a few miles from Panipat. The impetuous Afghan picked up his sword and made ready to take the field against Nadir straightaway. Both Asaf Jah and Khan-i-Dauran did their best to dissuade him from hasty action, but in vain. Saadat sent word to his men to be ready to take the field immediately. Four thousand

*Muhammad Shah joined the army at Panipat on 27 January in response to requests by the three generals — Asaf Jah, Qamar-ud-Din and Khan-i-Dauran. His harem, headed by Sarika-i-Dauran, accompanied him.

horsemen came out to follow the master. The rest pleaded fatigue, and refused to obey.

Unmindful of this rebuff, Saadat galloped away towards the enemy position. Nadir ordered a feint retreat. Saadat was jubilant at what he thought was a rout of the Persian vanguard. He sent messages to the Emperor for reinforcements so that the Persians could be rolled back out of Hindustan. Muhammad Shah waxed satisfaction, and ordered Khan-i-Dauran to join the Afghan with eight thousand horsemen. Nadir's ploy succeeded in drawing out the Mughals for a battle outside their fortifications.

The "retreating" Persian columns turned back a few miles from their camp. The battle that ensued marked a black day (Tuesday, 13 February) in the annals of the Mughals. Nadir, clad in full armour and wearing a splendid helmet, came out himself at the head of a thousand fire-footed horses ridden by the most experienced musketeers of Persia. Prince Nasrullah Khan was in charge of the centre with instructions to rush reinforcements to the wing that might need them. Saadat Khan, fighting with rare courage and recklessness, scored some early successes, but he was not able to stand for long against the deadly fire of Nadir's swivel guns. The elephant he rode was attacked by the frightened tusker of his nephew, Nasir Muhammad Khan Sher Jang, and forced into enemy lines. Unmindful of the danger confronting him, the Khan continued to fight with such fearlessness as aroused the admiration of the enemy. Near the end of the day, a Persian soldier, who happened to be the native of the town in Afghanistan to which belonged Saadat Khan, climbed up the elephant from the rear, shouting, "Saadat, what are you doing? Stop this madness. Whom are you fighting for? Your place is with the Shah".

This was the end of Saadat Khan's heroic resistance. His surrender came when the sun was about to set. Bleeding from every limb, he was carried away to the camp of Tahmasp Khan. There he lay on a cot, waiting for the next act of misfortune. Never did a groan come from his lips bemoaning the fate that had fallen him. Saadat was captured, not defeated. His refusal to accept the reality was a tribute to the dauntlessness of his spirit.

The battle, which began well after the midday prayer call, lasted for nearly four hours. Muhammad Shah himself came out at about 4 p.m. more to watch the proceedings than to take part in the bloody business of the sword. Asaf Jah remained by his side throughout. He too was a mere spectator, showing no inclination whatever to take the field. Thirty thousand Deccani troops at his command remained stuck to their posts

even when the news came that Khan-i-Dauran was carried off the field half-dead. The latter fought gallantly till he was mortally wounded in the face and carried away to the camp in a state of unconsciousness. His one thousand followers did the traditional act of supreme bravery when they dismounted from their horses and engaged the enemy on foot till all of them were mowed down to death by the shower of bullets from Persian guns.

"What chance could a sword or arrow have against the swivel gun?" wrote Abdul Karim Khan. Khan-i-Dauran breathed his last two days later on 15 February, shortly after he was laid on a cushionless divan inside a tent that smelt of death and poverty. "He died well as he died valiantly", remarked Nadir when he came to know of the manner in which he laid down his life. His last words were: "The act of dying is one of the acts of life. I lived in faith. I die in doubt. I know not whither I go. My parting advice is that in no circumstances should Nadir be allowed to proceed to Delhi. Send him back from here whatever the amount of indemnity you may have to pay". He was buried in the Qutb complex ten days later.

Khan-i-Dauran was perhaps the only noble man of the Mughal court whose loyalty was unquestioned. His devotion was, however, limited by narrow party considerations. Turani dominance was a thorn in his side. He did whatever he could to deflate that faction, notwithstanding the harm that came in the process to the interests of the Empire. "The Turani Muslims", he told Abdul Karim Khan, "are Turani first and Muslim afterwards".

Both Nasir Khan and Zakriya Khan were unable to organise effective resistance to the invader as Khan-i-Dauran, in the capacity of Paymaster General, was indifferent to their requirements of money and material. Factionalism blinded him to the needs of the Empire. Muhammad Shah supported him. He too distrusted the powerful junta who looked upon Transoxiana as their home. This anti-Turani bias came handy to Nadir Shah. He exploited it fully to his advantage.

With the removal of Khan-i-Dauran from the scene, the battle of Karnal came to an end. The Mughal army, or what remained of it, took to the heels, each man taking shelter where it could. A majority took to plundering their own camp, and then making off with whatever valuables they could lay their hands on. It is little wonder that the vast camp was reduced to ruins within hours after the sunset. The professional plunderers from the countryside also joined in the loot, and they hovered there till the early hours of the morning, searching for money and valuables. The Mughal losses, it is believed, were beyond calculation.

The harem tents of noblemen were torn to bits, and their inmates spirited away for sale or for self-gratification. Many women committed suicide, and many more ran away in utter confusion to take shelter in the darkness of the night. One historian told of a party of three young women who climbed a tree and remained there for four days before they were rescued by the Persians. Nadir gave them away to his own officials on condition that they would be treated with kindness and allowed to join their families at the end of the campaign. None of them survived the ordeal. Two of them, belonging to the seraglio of Asaf Jah, took to self-immolation by swallowing poison, and the third one, a concubine of Qamar-ud-Din Khan, met with an accidental death at Delhi two months later. She was a sister of the famous singer Nawab Bai. Nadir was charmed by "the innocence of her face and the ravishing tone of her husky voice", and he wanted her to accompany him to Persia. It was at the intervention of Muhammad Shah that the Persian monarch changed his mind. She sang at the last function attended by Nadir in the fort at Delhi. He gave her twenty-five thousand rupees and a diamond necklace worth twice that amount. Fierce in tooth and claw, Nadir became as tame as a duck when his ears caught the musical notes of a melodious, feminine voice. Even the most venomous cobra is charmed into pathetic helplessness by the strains of the *vina*. Every man, howsoever sanguine, is vulnerable to certain tender stimuli. Nadir surrendered to the sister of Nawab Bai.

For reasons best known to him, Nadir left the camp of Muhammad Shah unscathed. Perhaps he was averse to taking the risk of attacking a strongly fortified position. The Emperor expected an assault any time, but when none came by nightfall, he repaired to his tent, hoping against hope that Nadir would not press the invasion further. At a midnight meeting with Asaf Jah and Qamar-ud-Din, he invited suggestions for countering the effect of a humiliating setback and also for obtaining reinforcements from Delhi. At that time it was not known that the imperial army was virtually non-existent, and that nearly thirty thousand men had perished in the three hours of grim fighting. Muhammad Shah put his trust in God, and ended a brief meeting with a couplet of Maulana Rom: "Those who live by terror will in the end fall a prey to the wrongs they commit. The great Allah sees all, knows all".

Whether or not Muhammad Shah slept soundly that night is best left to conjecture. It is, however, a recorded fact that Nadir Shah kept awake, calculating his gains and losses, holding brief discussions with his generals, and drawing blue-prints for the next round. He was happy that

victory had come to him at Karnal. His eyes were, however, set on Delhi. and its famed riches. He had not come to Hindustan to make that land his home. He wanted its wealth, nothing else. Persia called him. He yearned to go back with camel-loads of treasures.

Chapter 21

CAST IN DIFFERENT ROLE

NADIR'S intention was not to kill Muhammad Shah and his counsellors, but to tame them into surrendering the hoarded riches of the nine generations of Mughals. He moved warily, taking care that the hen that laid the golden egg did not come to harm. Muhammad Shah must live, he decided. He was at the same time resolved to take to Persia all the hoards of gold, silver, and precious stones that made Hind the envy of other empires. To seek answers to some of the questions that agitated him, he ordered that Saddat Khan be brought to his presence immediately after the Isha prayers.

The proud and haughty Afghan, wearing bandages on wounds received earlier in the day, was ushered into Nadir's tent by Tahmasp Khan. Prince Nasrullah Khan escorted him to the improvised throne on which sat Nadir, smileless, grim, almost forbidding. Saadat Khan did the obeisance with a show of controlled dignity, and then waited for the Shah to open the dialogue.

"What made you fight desperately for the wretched Indians?"

"My pledge of loyalty. I have been in the service of the Mughals for over thirty years".

"You mean to say there is no loyalty in your heart for your motherland".

"It is not that I love my native place less, but that I respect loyalty more. Certain norms of morality are my guiding stars".

"At this stage, what can you do to vindicate your love for the land of your ancestors?"

"Anything within the bounds of honour and justice".

"Tell me, what should I do to open peace negotiations with Muhammad Shah".

"The key nobleman at the court is Asaf Jah. Invite him for talks. He

is a Turani. He may be depended upon to prevail upon the Emperor to accept your terms".

"How large and skilful is the Mughal army?"

"The strength of an army does not entirely depend upon numbers. Arrows are no match for bullets".

"I consider Indian soldiers a band of gutless, wayward beggars. They know only how to die, not to win battles. What is your assessment?"

"This is an unfair question. My tongue cannot speak what my heart feels".

At this point, Nadir relaxed somewhat. He stepped down the throne, held Saadat Khan for a moment by the arm, said a faint *shukria*, and then left for the adjoining tent. The meeting was over. It was apparent the Khan had impressed Nadir with his forthright honesty. Though his references to loyalty irked him, yet he admired the manner in which he said what he did. He felt that Muhammad Shah possessed in him a good friend, a good soldier, and a loyal counsellor. Will he join his service? Nadir preferred to wait and watch.

The next day, 14 February 1739, Nadir sent to Muhammad Shah a letter, together with a copy of the Quran, asking him to send Asaf Jah to his camp for peace negotiations. Though the sword, not God, was his law, Nadir sent a copy of the holy book to assure Muhammad Shah that no treachery was intended. The pros and cons of the invitation were analysed at a meeting of the court counsellors. Everyone agreed that there was no option but to accept it. Though Asaf Jah realized that to go into Nadir's camp was to walk into the cave of a tiger, yet he accepted the mission with a degree of admirable self-confidence. He had not lived for eighty years without learning how to please a wealth-hungry warrior. There was a pall of gloom over his camp as he bade farewell to his wives and relatives, and boarded a *palki* for the eight-mile trip. His parting advice to the Emperor was: "If there is treachery, Your Majesty may consider repairing to the Deccan and fighting the Persians from there". A pensive Muhammad Shah embraced Asaf Jah as he gave him leave to depart.

Adept at achieving great things with small, Nadir Shah took out his best smile to greet the Nizam. Speaking in Turki*, he complimented the

*Nadir Shah was a Turk in origin. His Turk ancestors settled in Persia two centuries earlier. The Turkish language fascinated him. During his stay in Hindustan, he invariably carried high-level talks in that language.

visitor at the ease with which he carried his long years and, in a casual manner, asked for the recipe. Back came the reply, in Turki: "I neither walk long distances nor do I take part in any other discipline or drill, but I never miss the daily exercise of raising my hands to Allah for mercy". Nadir flashed an extra-warm smile, and invited Asaf Jah to take the seat on his left. Prince Nasrullah Khan sat on the right.

Nadir began by stressing his enmity to the Afghans and "the indifference of the court of Hindustan to my pleas for support". He also complained about the "unfriendly treatment meted out to Persian envoys". Asaf Jah listened with respectful attention and, when the Shah ended his tale of grievances, Asaf Jah stood up, and said with utmost reverence: "We are passing through a new low in loyalties and efficiency. Factional disputes have worsened matters. Our lapses were only the mistakes of ignorance and negligence. They were not wilful affronts to a friendly empire. We regret our unwitting failings and indiscretions".

Nadir said he appreciated the "frank admissions of diplomatic errors", and he went on to allude to the reported huge sums of money paid as indemnity to "the naked Maharattas led by that freebooter Baji Rao". Asaf Jah was quick to understand the purport of that remark, and said: "We are prepared to make amends for the sufferings undergone by Your Majesty's soldiers".

It is not known how the figure of five million rupees was computed when Asaf Jah agreed to recommend to the Emperor that that amount be paid to the Persian monarch as indemnity. Nadir Shah expressed satisfaction at the outcome of the meeting, and he assured Asaf Jah that he would retrace his steps westwards as soon as the first instalment of two hundred thousand was paid. The balance was to be paid in three equal instalments at Lahore, Attock and Kabul.

Before the Vakil-i-Mulk left, Nadir handed over to him a nicely-worded letter, inviting Muhammad Shah to dinner the next day. Whereas the safe return of Asaf Jah was a matter of great relief to the Emperor and others, the invitation aroused understandable concern and speculation. Asaf Jah counselled prompt acceptance in words of friendly gratitude and informing the Shah that he, accompanied by all his senior noblemen, would leave the camp immediately after the evening prayers. A special messenger, Haji Mustafa Kamal, delivered this letter at the Persian camp before nightfall. Nadir appreciated the quick response, and he was reported to have told Tahmasp Khan, "If good words were guns, these Mughals would never lose a battle".

A little past eight in the evening of 15 February, the Mughal Emperor

arrived at the Persian camp at the head of five thousand unarmed bodyguard. He was accompanied by twenty-one seniormost courtiers and a number of newswriters and junior officials. The bodyguard were given halting orders a furlong from the main gate, and therefrom to the royal tent, Muhammad Shah and his civilian aides were escorted by Prince Nasrullah Khan and a contingent of armed Persian soldiers. Nadir Shah, clad simply in robes of grey and green, came out to receive Muhammad Shah. Following the customary loveless embrace, the two walked side by side (Muhammad Shah on the right) about fifteen paces before entering the tent. Asaf Jah, Qamar-ud-Din Khan and Ishaq Muhammad were the only three noblemen admitted to the dining chamber; the rest were escorted to the adjoining tent for entertainment.

All affability, Nadir asked Muhammad Shah to sit on his right at the royal carpet. The three Hindustani noblemen and two Persian dignitaries — Prince Nasrullah Khan and Tahmasp Khan — sat at a separate carpet on the left of the two monarchs. Before the richly dressed stewards brought in bowls of steaming hot Persian dainties on trays of gold, the Shah, addressing the Emperor, said: "Our way is to wage open wars. Treachery is not the weapon we ever employ to subdue an enemy. Brother Muhammad Shah, be at home. You and your counsellors are our honoured guests. Let us partake of the meal in full mutual trust and friendliness."

As the bowls of thick white stew were laid in front of the two kings, Nadir Shah exchanged his potion with that of his carpet-companion and, after saying the customary one-word invocation to God, raised the bowl to his lips. All others followed suit. Twenty-three courses of meats, vegetables and knick-knacks were shown around before golden cups half-full of Persian coffee were brought in. Nadir did his guest the rare honour of handing over the cup to him personally. The dinner, spread over ninety minutes of embarrassing silence, ended with tiny cubes of sparrow meat served with a paste of mint and vinegar.

The atmosphere of suspense and tension had gradually changed to one of trust and friendliness. In the course of talks that followed in the ante-room, Nadir asked Muhammad Shah many questions ranging between Bengal tigers and Baji Rao. At one point, the white-bearded Muhammad Ishaq intervened to give an answer to a question on the role of Syed Abdullah Khan in the formulation of state policies since 1720. Nadir was taken aback at "the audacity of this old man to mingle his voice with that of kings". Muhammad Shah was quick to explain that Ishaq was no ordinary septuagenarian. "He is a mint of knowledge in sciences, history

and languages. There is no one like him in this vast country. He was my tutor in childhood. Now he is my most respected preceptor in matters of the spirit. He combines in himself the virtues of the saints and seers of the yesteryear".

Nadir was impressed by the description of the man. He asked him to come and sit by his side. For nearly half an hour, the two talked about religion and the many abstractions about life and death. Ishaq was in his element. His knowledge of the language and history of Turkey was found by the Shah to be "profound and unsurpassed". In the end, he paid Ishaq the compliment of being the Aristotle of the age. "You are fit to be the first Vizir of any empire", he said.

After confirming the terms of accord accepted by Asaf Jah the previous day, Muhammad Shah asked his host for leave to return. "Of course, of course", replied Nadir in a voice that had in it no trace either of superiority or illwill. He took Muhammad Shah by the hand, and escorted him to the second gate. The safe return of the Emperor to his camp was a matter of low-key jubilations; it also aroused the hope that the victor did not contemplate direct involvement in the affairs of the Mughal court.

Nawab Qudsiya and Malika-i-Dauran jointly hosted a private reception for the Emperor. Thanksgiving prayers, not the normal paraphernalia of pleasure, were at the centre of this family get-together. According to the lady-in-waiting, forty-year-old Aqa Khanum, the Emperor related in detail the story of his meeting with Nadir Shah and he expressed the view that the Shah was "a complex personality difficult to understand and analyse". He praised his hospitality and the manner in which he showed respect to Muhammad Ishaq. Indian-style invocations to the gods of peace and prosperity were sung softly by a party of Rajput ladies at the function. Optimism pervaded the air. The war, it was generally believed, had ended. Though terror-stricken, Karnal lived again. The next move from the Persian side was awaited with expectations rooted more in wishfulness than in reality.

Earlier in the day (15 February) had died Khan-i-Dauran. His "parting advice" haunted the Emperor and the surviving junta of the ruling party. Feverish efforts were made to collect the first instalment of the agreed indemnity (rupees two million) lest Nadir changed his mind and decided to push on to Delhi. Before the pledge could be redeemed, there came to pass one of those inexplicables of history that change the course of events. On 18 February, Nadir sent a letter to Asaf Jah, suggesting that he would like to see him again. The unsuspecting Nizam went to the

Persian camp the next day. While he was waiting to be ushered into the royal tent, there came to him a brief note from Nadir in his own handwriting: "The indemnity", it said, "is five hundred million, not five million".* Asaf Jah was speechless at this hundred-fold increase in the Persian demand. He requested for an audience with the Shah "so that I can explain that that much money is just not available in the imperial treasury". His pleas went unheeded. The Nizam was a prisoner. He was lodged in a heavily-guarded tent close to that in which Saadat Khan had been staying for the last six days.

Nadir's plan was now as clear as the day. He wished to plunder north India of all its wealth before returning home. The Nizam felt that the invader might instal Prince Nasrullah Khan on the throne of Delhi in a bold bid to annex Hindustan to the Persian empire. He was helpless. There was no line of communication open for him to convey his thoughts to the Emperor.

There was panic at Karnal when the news came that Asaf Jah was under arrest. Terror seized the camp and the city. People began to flee the town. In three days, no less than five thousand soldiers deserted the camp. All exits from Karnal were infested with Persian soldiers looking out for plunder. This turmoil turned into blinding confusion as on 23 February there came a letter from Asaf Jah to the Emperor, saying simply that "the Shah will like to meet Your Majesty again before mid-day prayers tomorrow".

Realizing that this communication was written by Vakil-i-Mulk under duress, a large number of junior commanders came out openly in favour of "another trial of armed strength against these wretched Persians". However, Muhammad Shah decided "to go, in full trust in God and the Prophet". On Saturday, 24 February, Muhammad Shah, after bidding touching farewells to his mother and wife, left for the Persian camp at about ten in the morning. While taking leave of his grief-stricken mother, he told her: "It is no use lamenting. Our faith and our honesty will triumph in the end. Treachery is the weapon of the weak, and those alone".

Nadir Shah, without this time the array of warm smiles, received him, as on the previous occasion, a few paces outside the entrance to his tent,

*Some historians write that this increase in indemnity was made at the instance of Saadat Khan. The latter, it was believed, made the suggestion in anger against Asaf Jah who assumed to himself the post of Commander-in-Chief following the death of Khan-i-Dauran. This writer tends, however, to hold that Saadat Khan was too loyal a soldier to make such a suggestion out of frustration. The post could not be conferred on the Afghan while he was under detention in the Persian camp.

escorted him to a gilded chair near the mini-throne, and then left without speaking a word. Asaf Jah and Saadat Khan joined the bewildered Emperor after about thirty slow-moving minutes. Muhammad Shah too was under arrest. Heavily armed soldiers guarded the tent on all sides. What conversation took place among the three is not known. They seemed to have accepted their fate without questioning. It was useless to protest or to cry foul. Time, they perhaps agreed, would deliver in due course the intentions of Nadir. Muhammad Shah was lodged in a tent close to that of the Persian monarch.

The arrest of the Emperor was a curtain-raiser to the plunder that spread ruin upon ruin and reduced the imperial camp at Karnal to a heap of ashes and dust. Not a tent was left standing within the twelve-mile area. The inmates of the harems were transported to the Persian camp on camels, horses and in *palkis* in accordance with what looked like a carefully conceived plan. The mother and wife of Muhammad Shah were first taken to a garden outside the city, and then sent to the Persian camp under a fairly heavy guard. The women of the seraglios of Asaf Jah, Khan-i-Dauran and other nobles were huddled together in the house of the Qazi at Karnal. They went without food for two days before arrangements were made for supply to them of the essential amenities. One of Khan-i-Dauran's wives delivered herself of a child in harrowing circumstances. Both the mother and the child failed to survive the ordeal. They died soon after reaching the Persian camp on the third day.

The neighbouring peasantry joined in the loot. Launching rout upon riot, they made the confusion worst confounded. Not a shred of canvas, not a pole, not a brick was left in what was once a camp with a population of one million. Thousands perished in the rampage, and those who had the time to flee were cut to bits by the prowling Persian plunderers. The devastation the *Qazlbashs* (red caps) wrought was, in the words of Babu Rao Malhar*, a calamity unsurpassed in hideosity. Nadir remained unmoved by the stories of continuing plunder which reached him regularly. He remained shut up behind the heart of stone that delighted in others' misery and expanded at the sight of distress. It was a vile thing, to quote Malhar again, to see people die when they were unprepared for the catastrophe. Though it is as natural to die as to be born, yet the sight of death when it came suddenly and without warning was repulsive indeed.

*Babu Rao Malhar was the Maharatta envoy at the court of Muhammad Shah. He wrote a thrilling account of his escape from the camp at Karnal.

Mughal losses in money and material were incalculable. Figures given in some history books may be described as arbitrary conjectures. It would perhaps be more meaningful to say that the Mughal Empire temporarily ceased to exist as a result of happenings at Karnal, and all its properties passed into the hands of one whom Babu Rao called "an upstart shepherd brigand".

Though Nadir beguiled what he was by seeming otherwise, the Mughal nobility and the common man had no illusions about his intentions. Everyone feared that the city would be ransacked, and its inhabitants put to the sword in case they chose to resist. Many fled and many more hid themselves in temples and mosques and other religious places. Not only Karnal, but the whole of north India was in terror. Nadir haunted every soul. His plans were, however, kept a closely-guarded secret.

On 18 February, there came a proclamation under the seal of the Persian court that the Shah would proceed to Delhi " to have a look at the famed monuments and gardens of the capital". Here was an excuse to violate the accord which could not have been more lame and more important. Nadir was not on a sight-seeing excursion of Hindustan. His sooty heart yearned for blood and wealth. To him the monuments and gardens were of little interest. The lure of gold blinded him to all other values. His religion was wealth and his creed plunder. Karnal felt relieved at the announcement. Delhi trembled as the news reached there. It was factionalism that had pulled the country down.

Saadat Khan was the first Mughal general to turn traitor. Accompanied by Tahmasp Khan, he reached Delhi on 27 February with a force of five thousand Afghans. The Governor, Luftullah Khan, and the city police chief, Haji Faulad Khan, were advised by him to surrender in the name of peace. "To resist is to court disaster", he wrote to Luftullah Khan. The latter was a soldier not fit to stand by Asad Khan, and he agreed without much ado to hand over the fort and the city to Nadir's representatives. A large number of Afghan and Persian troops moved into Delhi to ensure quiet and peace. Though outwardly calm, the city quaked within, not knowing what fate would befall it when Nadir arrived.

Both Saadat Khan and Luftullah Khan toured the thickly-populated areas, exhorting people to exercise restraint and not to do anything which might be construed as hostility to the Persian ruler. The representatives of various communities were told that Nadir Shah bore no ill-will for the people of Hindustan, and that he planned to return to Persia after a few days' stay in the capital. They also had it proclaimed from the pulpit of

the Jama Masjid that the people of Delhi were expected "to do the double duty of welcoming King Nadir Shah with both arms and paying homage as hithertofore to Emperor Muhammad Shah".

The population were confused by this continuing barrage of contradictory exhortations. Uncertainty hung in the air. The weak of will made haste to leave the city. The rich fortified their houses and waited, with prayers on their lips, for the arrival of the conqueror. An old saintly resident of Chandni Chowk swallowed poison, leaving a piece of rough paper in the inner pocket of his cotton-wool jacket on which were scribbled the words: "It is senseless to live when to live is torment".

To bewail a calamity that is yet to take place is to face double calamity. The tension generated by the patrolling of streets by broad-chested *Qazilbashs* gathered steam as the news spread that Nadir, accompanied by Muhammad Shah, had left Karnal for Delhi on the first day of March. Rumour-mongers had a field day for the next week. Some said that Muhammad Shah was in chains and that he was made to ride a miserable-looking elephant at the rear of the cavalcade. Others asserted that Asaf Jah and Qamar-ud-Din Khan were carried unceremoniously on the backs of ponies not fit even for the peasantry. Similar stories went into circulation in respect of the queen and the queen-mother. The long habit of floating frightening rumours spawned in them the reluctance to wait patiently for the arrival of the Shah. The result was a type of indescribable confusion in the minds of men everywhere. The shape of calamity to come was not visible clearly to anyone. A vague fear stalked the streets of the metropolis. The people looked at one another inquiringly, but they spoke not a word. There were monsters in their thoughts.

The suspense ended on 7 March with the arrival of Nadir at Shalimar Gardens, six miles from Delhi. The airy gossip about the alleged ignominies inflicted upon the Emperor and his two Vizirs turned out to be no more than imaginary creations of pallid minds. Muhammad Shah, in royal clothes, rode a magnificent elephant just behind the team of Nadir's bodyguard. The entourage of Muhammad Shah, including his mother and wife, came in silver-plated palanquins guarded by crack Persian troops. Asaf Jah and Qamar-ud-Din Khan followed on horses immediately behind the Persian Vizir, Tahmasp Khan. There was no apparent sign of any insulting behaviour towards the Mughal royal party. Nadir took care not to hurt their *amour propre* and to treat them more or less on equality with his own family. In victory, he could well afford to be chivalrous.

Nadir was now the *de facto* master of Hindustan. His plan was to rob

the Empire of its wealth, not its Mughal character. He wanted Muhammad Shah to hand over to him voluntarily the treasure chests: the rest was of little use to him. Nadir was jealous of Muhammad Shah because of his billions of gold and silver coins, not because of his robes of red and purple. He mocked the men who shed their blood for the sake of honour, and that alone. "You cannot buy even a simple meal with honour", he told Asaf Jah when the latter used that word in support of his pleas for release from detention. Nadir believed that all values, howsoever abstract, could be reduced to the quantum of riches and poverty of the concerned society. He came to Hindustan principally as a plunderer, not as a seeker after the glory of conquest as did Alexander and Babar. Essentially a highway robber, he was hell-bent on enriching himself at the cost of others. As has been said before, his war was against man and God.

He was happier than he knew when Nadir was informed that Saadat Khan and Luftullah Khan were there to greet him with the news that the city was quiet and ready to give him a warm welcome. The Persian monarch was gratified in particular at the manner in which Luftullah Khan handed over to him the keys of the Red Fort on a platter bearing in gold thread the likeness of the Peacock Throne. Robes of high honour, together with the insignia of loyalty, were bestowed upon him in the presence of Muhammad Shah. The latter spoke not a word. The palour on his face proclaimed loud and clear that what Nadir willed was fate; necessity and chance had no place in his scheme of governance.

Orders were issued for five thousand Persian troops to enter Delhi and to take such steps as might be called for to ensure continued peace and respect for authority. The high-spirited *Qazlbashs* were dazzled by the beauty and prosperity of the city. They marched on roads flanked by high mansions and shops laden with merchandise with wonderment in their eyes and perhaps the lust for plunder in their hearts. Both Saadat Khan and Luftullah Khan returned to the fort before the evening shut. They were to make arrangements for entry of the defeated Emperor into the city the next day.

As desired by Nadir Shah, the Emperor and the ladies of his harem left Shalimar Gardens well before noon on 8 March. Though the sun shone brightly, there was cool in the air following an overnight shower of light rain. A short procession, headed by a contingent of Persian cavalry in green uniforms and red caps, wended its way to the heart of the city in silence broken now and again by the neighing of horses. There were few spectators on the dusty pathway. The population were loath to see their defeated Emperor in shame and humiliation. Muhammad Shah rode an

elephant in a semi-gilded howdah. His face was pale and sad. Seldom before had a Mughal Emperor come to his capital in such utter destitution. His mission was to prepare the ground for Nadir Shah's triumphal entry into the city the next day. The vanquished was expected to receive the victor at the fort gate with pageantry due to an overlord.

There was deep hush as the Emperor entered the fort precincts by the main gate. An old lady, covering her head with thin shawl, broke down at the pitiable sight. Amidst sobs, she shouted at the top of her meagre voice, "O' Muhammad Shah, my son, put up with this misfortune with fortitude. The bird of fortune likes to hop from roof to roof in every age". Muhammad Shah looked at her, plucked a gold button from the cuff of his coat, and threw it to her, saying, "Keep this for the rainy day. Khuda Hafiz". Before the bewildered woman could pick up the surprise gift, she was spirited away by Persian gendarmes on duty. What happened to her is not known.

With life-burning heaviness in his head, Muhammad Shah occupied for his residence the modest apartment on the first floor of the *Deori** and then went about refurbishing the famous four-room set of Shah Jahan for Nadir's stay. The gloom in the fort thickened as the queen and the queen-mother took residence in cottages reserved for maid-servants. The harem apartments were spruced up for the ladies of Nadir's seraglio. Woe to the ruler who has to play the host to his conqueror!

Nadir left Shalimar Gardens early in the morning on 9 March. He rode a splendid grey charger that was perhaps aware of the greatness of the occasion; it seemed to dance joyfully on its sturdy, shapely legs as it went forth step by a majestic step with the grim, stern-faced Shah of Persia on its back. The reins of gold were held by Nadir in his gloved left hand with such authority as to compel the animal to respond to his will without demur. Wearing the field uniform of a Persian general, complete with helmet and all, Nadir truly stole the show as he entered the fort amidst shouts of welcome by hundreds of hired spectators. The bands played the traditional victory tunes when Nadir alighted from his mount to acknowledge with sunless smiles the greetings of Muhammad Shah and his noblemen. After the prescribed formal homage was paid, Nadir relaxed somewhat, and he stepped forth to embrace Muhammad Shah.

From this point onwards, Nadir was the real Emperor of Hindustan, and Muhammad Shah a mere shadow of his erstwhile royal status. For the next fifty-seven days, Nadir was first, Nadir last, Nadir in the midst,

*A small and self-contained structure at the entrance of the main building is called *Deori*.

Nadir everywhere. The Mughal dynasty had come to a sorry pass; it was never the same again. The obeisance to Nadir shattered the talisman of Mughal invincibility. The Empire broke up into parts. Loyalty forsook the hearts of men at high places. No longer was the court grounded on the principles of justice and equity, nor even on the high religious enunciations of Alamgir. No earthly misery could have been more galling for Muhammad Shah than to live in the shadow of defeat at the hands of the Persian adventurist.

Many historians have given soul-searing accounts of the banquet hosted by Muhammad Shah in honour of Nadir on 9 March. The victor that evening was at his arrogant worst. Nothing seemed to please him, not even the dust-eating humility with which the Emperor himself passed on to him the dainty creations of his chefs. Nadir did not like to say a word in praise of what he saw and ate. Stern-faced reserve, the more practised, the more repugnant it became. The servile efforts of the host to brighten up the proceedings led only to a further deepening of the gloom. As one writer pointed out, "The ill-mannered son of darkness seemed to derive inward joy from the discomfiture of his host". His plan perhaps was to humble riches, and to show to the fun loving Muhgal court that he was cast in a different role. He was out to rob the prosperous for the benefit of the indigent.

Chapter 22

BARBARIC BRUTALITY

LIKE all despots, Nadir believed that he had been chosen by nature for a crusade against the ills of man. What he willed to do or say, it was his conviction, was the wisest, virtueosest, discreetest, best. Thus to argue him out of his mood was to ask for the moon. Despots would not be despots if they were to be responsive to the smiles and graces in the halls of entertainment. They are laws unto themselves.

At the banquet, Saadat Khan was in attendance on the Shah. An acute observer, he perceived in Nadir's silence a general resentment — against what or whom he was not able to guess. When back in his apartment, Nadir turned to the Afghan turncoat and reprimandid him severely for not having advised Muhammad Shah "to welcome me at the banquet with the demanded ransom of rupees five hundred million". He had not gone to Muhammad Shah, Nadir explained, to eat Mughal food and to join in the "buffoonery of meaningless talk". He was in Delhi on business, not on a sight-seeing jaunt, Nadir thundered, and he told the bewildered general that unless the ransom was handed over to him by noon the next day, he would use his own methods to extract the amount from the treasure houses. "This is a warning, and you will be well advised to convey it to Muhammad Shah before he retires for the night". Nadir's face burned in anger like a coal. His demand must be met, he repeated, within the next twelve hours. It was for Saadat Khan to guess the consequences.

Deeply hurt at the insult, the Afghan repaired to his apartment in the left wing, and swallowed a dose of lethal poison. He was dead before the deputy Chamberlain came in to inquire about the next day's schedule of the Shah's engagements. The news of Saadat's self-immolation spread quickly in the palace, as in the city. The reason for his action was not known to anyone. Nadir ascribed it casually to "a fit of melancholy". Muhammad Shah passed no comment. However, he made no secret of his sorrow at the passing away of a dauntless soldier. The common man saw

in Saadat's death "an act of penitence" that came earlier than expected. A popular bard sang softly, "As a camp-follower of the invader, the once fearless Afghan lived a life half-dead. It is better that he is full dead. It was not the first time that courage was deceived by avarice".

The previous six days had been spent by Nadir in posting Persian troops at all police stations in the city, strengthening security arrangements around the palace, inspecting records of the imperial treasury, checking the lists of art objects in the fort vaults, questioning the court officials about the extent and whereabouts of the hidden Mughal wealth, gathering information about the jewellery belonging to the queen-mother, as also the ornaments in possession of other ladies of the royal harem — in fact, Nadir left no source untapped to assess the ransom-paying capacity of Muhammad Shah. Roughly, his calculations supported the demand for rupees five hundred million in cash, and art objects of the same value. He was resolved not to be content with anything less than that amount. Muhammad Shah's inability to pay up that amount would mean, he was reported to have told Prince Nasrullah Khan, that "the people of this wealthy capital will have to make good the deficit". Nadir was a hard business man; it was not his practice to backpaddle and compromise. In his code of plunder, death was the only alternative to default. The middle course, according to him, was the surest way to eternal perdition. Nadir often woke up at night to scrutinize the tables of figures, and he went to sleep again only if he was satisfied that his informers were reliable. Doubt is a corollary of despotism.

Id-uz-Zuha fell on 10 March. The nobility and the common man were in a gay, generous mood that day. The brazen thoughts of plunder ceased for the time to roar in the heads of the invaders; all now was turned to feast and prayer, peace and camaraderie. Brown faces, friendly and smiling, swarmed in the streets and courtyards of mosques big and small. Men and children walked about in leisurely, pilgrim steps. There was no fear in the air, no dread of the invader. Even Persians and Hindustanis embraced each other, thus underlining universal love and understanding.

A shrewd tactician that he was, Nadir had himself proclaimed Emperor that day from the pulpit of Jama Masjid. The *Khutba* was read in his name, and prayers said for his long life and happiness. The people of Delhi were taken aback at this unexpected development. Nadir, seeking plunder, had found an empire. There was a loud hush in the city. Though the feasting continued, the thoughts of the population turned to the grim reality of the end of Mughal dynasty. The atmosphere became charged with suspense, uncertainty. Nobody could stand up and speak against the

proclamation. Turk, Kurd, Mongol and Persian soldiers roamed about joyfully in the streets. The city was under their control. The festival mood tapered off gradually into one of caution and evil forebodings. A few brave hearts protested against this sudden change in the occupancy of throne, and they were silenced quickly by Persian gunmen on duty. The undercurrents of hostility against the Persians gathered speed. The pulse of the city began to beat faster. In low whispers, the people asked one another many a question that baffled them. The Id-Day turned into a day of wild conjectures.

Nadir, subtler soldier of all the field, went to Muhammad Shah's apartment after the mid-day prayers, apparently to facilitate him on the holy day, but in actuality to underline what the official Persian historian called the generosity of his heart. Nadir embraced Muhammad Shah in feigned affection that looked genuine, and without making an introductory explanation, said:

Brother Muhammad Shah, on this sacred day of Id-uz-Zuha, I hand back to you for safe-keeping the Empire that fell in my lap this morning. With this gift, I also give you a pledge of friendship and support. May you rule over this country for long, long years.

Muhammad Shah stood up in excitement. At the profferred gift, his face was wreathed in gratitude and his eyes became bright with joy. Hardly able to express his thoughts, he touched the Shah's knees in servile appreciation and thereafter pledged "all that I possess" as the Id-Day gift to Nadir. The latter remonstrated that he did not come to receive a gift, but to give one. Muhammad Shah gathered courage and said that the Mughal tradition demanded the gifts exchanged on a sacred day were of near-equal value. "You have given me the empire, and I offer to you all the material wealth it possesses. Please do me the honour of accepting it". Nadir's face lit up in self-commendation. His ploy had worked as planned. He could now take away to Persia not five hundred millions but millions without number. The wealth of Hindustan defied calculation in mathematical terms.

As a token of his offer, Muhammad Shah presented to the Shah an assortment of "gold and diamond jewellery that made the sun hid its diminished head in shame". Nadir indicated acceptance with one of his rare broad smiles. The plunder plot could not have been executed with greater precision. There was no limit to the ransom he could demand. The city of Delhi, mansion-house of antiquity, was at his mercy. Most of his

victories were dishonest, but this one against Muhammad Shah took the prize in chicanery. Nadir was happiest in deceit.

The meeting ended on the twin notes of peace and friendship. Nadir repaired to his apartment in the certainty of billions, and Muhammad Shah went to the cottage of Nawab Qudsiya to share his happiness with the worldly-wise queen-mother. The latter was quick to see through the plot, and she told her son to be vigilant. "Beware of plunderers and prostitutes", she warned, and she went on to relate a story from Shah-Nama that highlighted the misery that overtook Amir Timur because of his reliance on the word of a wayward Cossack. Muhammad Shah became pensive. The observation by his mother that "Nadir is tempted not by one devil, but by a legion" roared in his head. Uneasy apprehensions filled his mind. He looked at his mother with tenderness born of respect, and begged for leave to depart. "Do not let fear smother your joy. God will look after you", she replied, raising her dainty hands skywards in prayer. The ex-Emperor came out, intending to seek the views of Asaf Jah and Qamar-ud-Din Khan on the latest developments.

Satan finds some mischief or another for fearful hearts to go berserk. The population of Delhi was tense at the thought of what lay in store for them. Some feared they were at the point of death, others were in haste to transport their women and children out of the danger zone. The stories of savagery perpetrated by Nadir at Jalalabad and other places were on everybody's lips. Amidst the see-saw of this nerve-wrecking stress, there came the news, floating as it were on the wings of destiny, that Nadir was shot dead by a woman guard as he was coming out of the fort gate. Deep hush!

Gradually, the hidden fears transformed themselves into open anger against the Persian invaders. A few young and swearing rebels against the Persian authority fell upon a body of Turk guardsmen and killed them before rescue parties could reach the spot. The fat was in the fire. The rich and poor of Delhi came out in the streets with whatever weaponry they could lay their hands upon. The call for vengeance added fuel to the flame. Within an hour, an estimated five hundred foreign gendarmes lay dead or dying in the narrow streets of the capital. Figures of casualties in the first wave of revenge vary from historian to historian. Some estimate the number of killed to be in the neighbourhood of seven thousand, others keep the figure as low as a couple of hundred. The fact remained, however, that a fairly large number of Persian soldiers were done to death by infuriated mobs.

When Nadir came to know of the rumour of his own death and its

aftermath, he tended to play it calm and make thorough investigations before initiating action against the erring body of hooligans. He sent out Tahmasp Khan to take stock of the situation and to restore order with the help of additional ten thousand troops.

The appearance of this massive force in Chandni Chowk and the neighbouring areas yielded quick results. The seekers of vengeance took refuge wherever they could—in houses, shops, mosques, temples, by-lanes and even on tree tops. All was quiet by nightfall. The dead and the wounded were taken to the camp. Nadir waited in his apartment till midnight for a report on the incident. Thereafter, he went to sleep with instructions: "Wake me up only if punitive action is called for. I shall see the Vizir at eight in the morning".

The next day, March 11, dawned bright and clear. This was the day of Holi, festival of colour. As had been their custom from the times immemorial, the Hindus, of all ages and denominations, came out with the rising of the sun with buckets full of *gulal* water in their hands, ready to celebrate the day with traditional abandon and cheer. In the ensuing surge of gaiety, a few Persian troops happened to be smeared with colour. Altercations developed into skirmishes, and then there began "a systematic slaughter of the *kaffirs* for polluting the faithful with colour and dust". Reprisals and counter-reprisals spread all over the city like a roaring fire. Memories of the previous day aggravated the situation further. Several hundred Persians and many times more Indians fell in the fracas. The report of this new flare-up enraged Nadir. He rode his famous grey horse to the Roshan-ud-Daula Golden Mosque in the centre of Chandni Chowk. There he waited for half an hour before drawing his sword out of the scabbard—a signal for general loot, general massacre, general rape and a general spread of ruin till the sword was slid back into its resting place.

The carnage that followed was the bloodiest in Indian history. Thirty thousand Persian soldiers, armed with swords, guns and what had they, went on the rampage in cold blood. Chandni Chowk and all surrounding areas came under the fury of the invader. Men and women jumped into wells to escape the rising tide of slaughter. The famous jewellery shops in bazaar Dariba bore the look of hideous skeletons when the rampage ended five hours later. Young girls were raped to death publically in the full gaze of drunken soldiery. The streets of Delhi were littered with limbs without bodies and bodies without limbs. The mansions of the rich were ransacked for treasures of wealth and art objects. The huts of the poor were set ablaze, and shrieking children roasted alive therein. All

sources of drinking water were poisoned. The stocks of food in shops and houses were either burned or transported to the camp. Traders and shopkeepers were pulled out of their hiding places and hacked to death limb by limb. The wealthiest trader of the city, one Dhani Ram, was made to standby while his wife and three daughters were raped and an infant son reduced to mincemeat for the dogs of Nadir's kennel. Similar fate befell every infant that caught the eye of the plunderers. Decency and mercy hung their heads in shame as Nadir's men indulged in orgy of brutal, barbaric killings.

The shadow of death hung all over Delhi as Muhammad Shah sent to Nadir Shah an abject petition for mercy by the hand of Asaf Jah. Qamar-ud-Din Khan accompanied the Vakil-i-Mulk on this servile mission. Their way to the mosque was barred by heaps of dead bodies and barricades put up by the blood-thirsty buccaneers of Nadir's forces. It was with the help of a Persian colonel, Mirza Mussadiq, that they gained admittance to Nadir's presence. With a gleaming sword held firmly in his hand, the latter received the envoys without lowering the voltage of fury on his visage. He read the petition without a sign of thaw in his anger. He spoke not a word till Asaf Jah, with tears in his wrinkled eyes, begged forgiveness for the sins of the population. Nadir gave no reply. Then Qamar-ud-Din went on his knees, and pleaded for pity and pardon. Nadir remained unmoved by the pathos in the Vizir's voice.

Then Nadir's eyes chanced to fall on a child, blood oozing out from nearly all his pores, struggling desperately to evade his pursuers. Nadir got up from his wooden seat and, without looking at either Asaf Jah or Qamar-ud-Din, slid the sword back into the scabbard. The five-hour date with death and destruction thus came to an end. The halt-massacre trumpets were sounded first in the mosque, then in all parts of the city.

The child who spawned pity in Nadir's heart was brought to his presence. He looked at him, it seemed, with eyes within, ordered care to be taken of him by the royal physician. It is believed that the child was taken by Nadir with him to Persia, and that in due time he rose to occupy a high place in the court hierarchy.

Estimates of the number of those killed in the five fateful hours (9 a.m. to 2 p.m.) of 11 March 1739, ranged between fifty thousand and four hundred thousand. The Persian chroniclers understandably tended to play down the casualties as also the extent of sufferings undergone by the people. The accounts of Hindustani and European writers appear to be nearer the truth than those of Nadir's news-writers. It may not be far wrong to put the figure of the dead at one hundred thousand.

For months after the holocaust, the city stank of blood, death and devastation. Famine and epidemics took an additional heavy toll of life till the winter of 1740. The pains and poignancies of the plundered meant nothing to Nadir. His brain was in more ways than one the devil's workhouse. Adept at producing seemingly cogent reasons for his barbarities, he succeeded in making Muhammad Shah believe that the responsibility for the sack of Delhi rested on its people, and those alone.

The fact remained, however, that all his actions from Peshawar onwards were carefully planned in advance. The plunder of Delhi was the one irreducible objective of his campaign. All his warnings, threats, and the seeming gestures of goodwill and generosity were of a piece with that overriding aim. Silence was the siege of his self-seeking, one-track mind. Nadir kept his thoughts for the most part to himself. Here was a measure of the deceit that fuelled his destructive doings. Of all the instruments that was most useful to him was the tight lip. His speechless intellect served more to fortify his folly than his reason. It was no use to him to flaunt his brain when he could get what he wanted by the sword. Generally, Nadir thought the worst of men and women who revelled overmuch in the modalities of their own voice.

Fifteen days later, on 26 March, there took place the wedding of Prince Nasrullah Khan with a Mughal Princess, Jahan Naz*, in whose person, according to a Persian writer, "shone beauty, sweetness, goodness". The gifts given by Nadir to the princess were estimated to be of the value of rupees five hundred thousand. The centre-piece of the dowry, given in the name of Muhammad Shah, was a glittering diamond bracelet which once adorned the person of Begum Mumtaz Mahal. The pledge-money was fixed at rupees half a million. The wedding ceremony was presided over jointly by Persian and Hindustani priests. The bride's "Yes" was obtained by Maulana Ishaq Muhammad, head Imam of Jama Masjid.

Both Nadir Shah and Muhammad Shah held separate entertainments to celebrate the occasion. The banks of the Yamuna were lit at night by thousands of earthen lamps for a whole week prior to the wedding day. Private *Bazm-i-Tarab* (pleasure parties) were held in the Persian and Mughal apartments alternately during the festive fortnight. The dance and song performance by the Delhi artist, Munawar Bai, stole the limelight on the concluding day. "Grace was in all her steps, heaven in

*Jahan Naz was daughter of Dewar Baksh, grandson of Murad Baksh and great grandson of Shah Jahan. Dewar Baksh's mother was a daughter of Aurangzeb.

her eyes, in every gesture divinity and charm"—thus wrote the Persian poet Maqbul. Nadir was so charmed by her performance that while handing over to her a purse of five thousand rupees, he expressed a wish that she accompany him to Persia. Since Nadir's every wish was a commandment, it took Munawar Bai several suspenseful days to regain her freedom.

At the end of her performance on the last day of his stay in Delhi, the otherwise sedate Nadir exclaimed "What voice, what rhythm! Divine harmony smoothed her charming tunes; angels were delighted to listen to her". His parting gift to her was a red velvet bag containing God only knew what. "Munawar Bai plundered the plunderer!" wrote an Urdu poet of Karnal. Her fame spread throughout Hindustan. When she died thirty-three years later following a brief illness, she was buried in Shalimar Gardens at the place where was pitched Nadir's tent on his arrival in Delhi on 3 March. The plaque on her grave carried Nadir's words "Divine Harmony".

Unlike the winter wind, Nadir's mind never changed it course. Nautch-girls and singers failed to make a dent on his resolve to carry to Persia as much wealth as he could squeeze out of Hindustan. The wedding was only a pleasant diversion; it did not in any way diminish the demon within him. On 20 March, he called Muhammad Shah to his apartment for "consultations that cannot be deferred any longer". Delighting, as was his wont, in revenge and fury, Nadir set aside all forms of courtesy, and sternly demanded from the self-effacing Muhammad Shah "the material wealth of the Empire that you pledged yourself to hand over to me in return for the Id-day gift I bestowed on you".

The thoughts of regaining the rule of Hindustan ever hovered around Muhammad Shah. He stood up respectfully from his seat on the left, and replied: "You know all, sire, specify the amount and the items, and an effort will be made to redeem my pledge". Nadir relaxed a little. He pulled the rope, and in came Tahmasp Khan with a "document of demands" written in Turki. Muhammad Shah, a picture of pensive helplessness, read the document in deep silence, the colour of his face changing from light brown to deeper and deeper hues of pale yellow as he progressed from clause to clause. When he ended, Muhammad Shah stood speechless for a few-moving moments, and then said, "My helplessness, not my will, accepts these demands". Nadir came down the mini-throne, and quipped gleefully, "We rejoice in your helplessness, not in your will". The meeting ended with Nadir wishing Muhammad Shah "the courage to put up with the travails of defeat". The latter raised

his hands to thank God for what was left to him. "It is little use crying over the spilt milk", he remarked.

The list of Nadir's demand included, among other lesser things, the following:

Ransom money, rupees seven hundred millions. Of this amount, rupees one hundred fifty millions to be paid in cash within eight days, and the balance to be paid in equal instalments at Karnal, Peshawar, Jalalabad and Kabul.

- Peacock Throne (valued officially at rupees ninety million)
- Koh-i-Noor diamond (value beyond assessment)
- One-half of the properties of all members of the nobility who escaped massacre or loot.
- Rupees twenty million to be collected from all able-bodied citizens of Delhi.
- A special levy of rupees two million from the Vizir, Qamar-ud-Din Khan, together with all his jewellery*
- Three hundred elephants.
- Ten thousand horses.
- Ten thousand camels.
- Special levy of rupees twenty million from the Diwan, Majlis Rai **

Like all despots, Nadir distrusted everybody. "To trust the word of a defeated enemy is to believe an epitaph", he told Nasrullah Khan when the latter tended to think that Muhammad Shah would redeem his pledge in time, that is, ten days before the scheduled dated of Nadir's departure from Delhi. In him, all ideas were concentrated into suspicion and disbelief. His lurking fear of the Rajputs and Maharattas was a child of his ever distrustful nature. At one stage, he contemplated plundering Rajasthan and then marching on to the Deccan in search of more wealth. Jaipur, Jodhpur and Udaipur strengthened their defences, and waited for the worst.

Similarly, Baji Rao sounded the red alert in territories south of the

* On his show of inability to pay that amount, Qamar-ud-Din Khan was made to stand in hot sun for several hours a day. His wives and relatives ultimately came to his rescue. The amount was paid up four days before Nadir's departure.

**At his inability to pay the amount, the ears of Majlis Rai were cut off in open court. The nobelman drank a cup of fatal poison on 8 April.

Narbada in anticipation of a Persian assault. Nadir's captains, colonels and knights-in-arms expressed themselves against further penetrations into Hindustan. For once, Nadir accepted their word of caution, and announced his decision to leave Delhi on return journey to Persia by the end of April. There was a feeling of relief everywhere. The sufferings he brought upon the people of Delhi were infinite. The name Nadir haunted men, women and children. This ruler of Persia, wrote Kidar Nath, was one of nature's most disagreeable blunders. "He has a perpetual hatred for all men, and all men, except perhaps a few million of his countrymen who stand to profit by his plunders, hate him intensely in return", wrote the author of *Barbriat*. To Hindustanis in general, and the people of Delhi in particular, Nadir was a world without the sun—bleak, hostile, forbidding. The fundamental fault of the character of despots is that it has no sense of justice. Nadir was nearly always like a frenzied bull. What a whirlwind of daring aggression was his head, and what a whirlpool of defeat and servility was all the rest about him!

On Tuesday, 1 May 1739, Nadir held a farewell Darbar in the Hall of Public Audience. The Mughal and Persian dignitaries were invited to attend this last function of the Shah-in-Shah's* stay in India. Muhammad Shah sat to the left of Nadir on a mini-throne at least eighteen inches lower than that on which sat the Persian monarch. The proceedings began with Tahmasp Khan reading out a proclamation that "the Shah-in-Shah, sovereign ruler of Persia and Hindustan, friend of the faithful, firmly rooted in values held high by Prophet Muhammad, messenger of goodwill towards all" has decided in divine wisdom to leave Delhi after handing over the empire of Hind to "our brother in spirit and in religion, Muhammad Shah". Thereafter, the Persian Vizir recounted briefly the sequence of events leading to and following the battle of Karnal, and ended thus:

The Shah-in-Shah, humble servant of God, accomplished successfully the mission entrusted to him by destiny. The enemies of Persia have been told in clear, unambiguous language to respect the values of truth and courteous behaviour enjoined by Islam. In handing over the empire of Hind back to its former ruler, the Shah-in-Shah hopes that the canons of friendship and good neighbourly relations will be fully respected by him and his successors. The benign Shah also hopes that all segments of

*During his two-month stay in Hindustan, Nadir worked in the title Shah-in-Shah. All his decrees and orders were issued under the seal of that title.

society, in particular the Rajputs and Maharattas, will lend their support to the Mughal ruler in upholding the spirit of this accord. The Shah-in-Shah wishes the Empire well, and he pledges himself here and now to return to Delhi in case there is a threat from any quarter to its integrity.

The assembly listened to the proclamation in silence that became more silent as the Vizir turned one sombre page after another. Finally when he handed over the proclamation to Muhammad Shah, two Persian priests stepped forward to help Nadir perform the ceremonial of transfer of power to the Mughal King. Nadir came down the throne, step by a dignified step, received the crown from the hands of the Mulla-i-Azam, and placed it gently on the head of Muhammad Shah. Nadir then tied a bejewelled dagger around the Emperor's waist. A team of junior priests chanted appropriate verses from the Quran, and then prayers were said by the entire assemblage for divine guidance of Muhammad Shah in the tasks ahead of him. Nadir Shah held Muhammad Shah in light embrace for a few seconds, and then left the Hall accompanied by Prince Nasrullah Khan and high Persian dignitaries. The curtain thus came down the high drama of Nadir's seizure and exercise of supreme authority in Delhi for almost two months.

Four days later, on 5 May 1739, Nadir Shah left Delhi with his millions. Besides, he carried with him hundreds of masons, blacksmiths and carpenters for building in Persia a city of the size and magnificence of Delhi. Seven leading architects of northern India, headed by Ustad Najibullah, were invited to join his service on liberal terms. These highly skilled craftsmen had no choice but to obey the command. They travelled up to Lahore, and from there they managed somehow to return to their homes. A few lost their lives in the secret bid to regain their freedom, but by and large the attempts to flee the camp under the cover of darkness were successful.

At Lahore, the Governor, Zakirya Khan, was rewarded profusely by Nadir for his "loyalty and devotion to duty". The official news-writer observed that but for his tact and vigilance, the Persian army would have found it difficult to elude the tribal plunderers. As it was, the rear of the Persian camp was occasionally plundered by the roving bands of tribal wayfarers. A stock-taking at Lahore revealed that jewellery and art objects worth millions of rupees were lost *en route* from Delhi. Many a Jat and Sikh family of Punjab is to this day in possession of precious jewellery looted from the camp of Nadir Quli Shah.

The crossing of the flooded Chenab was eventful in that no less than

two thousand Persian soldiers were drowned in the swirling waters of the river as the bridge collapsed under their weight. Nadir ordered several of his engineers to be shot dead for "their negligence and failure to check the pillars before giving the green signal for the forces to cross". The bridge was reconstructed in the record time of twelve days. Nadir was the last to go across on 3 July.

Once on the other side of the Sind, three weeks later, Nadir was on home ground. All territories to the west of that river were given by Muhammad Shah to the Shah in return for the latter's gift of the Empire to him on 1 May. Thereafter, Nadir, it may be presumed for purposes of record, passed out of the history of Hindustan. The scars he left behind were deep and virtually incurable. The Mughal Empire never recovered from the shock. The defeat at Karnal was a point of steep decline in its post-Alamgir history. Depleted of good soldiers, good administrators and, what was most, good men, the kingdom broke up into independent parts. Oudh, Bengal, Bihar and Deccan*, as also the states of Rajasthan, flaunted their freedom as new graduates do their learning.

The Empire was left with no centre, only peripheries. The resolves of defeated men at recovery were written as it were, in water, and their plans of comeback traced in sand. It required a far greater man than Muhammad Shah to pull the country out of the slough of self-pity. From a man in disgrace, no one expected a miracle of reconstruction. Vanquished kings, like unfaithful women, find few real friends. They walk the earth alone. The gates of heaven are also shut against them.

The circumstances were against Muhammad Shah. It was, therefore, not surprising that the devil called him. Gradually, he sank in the stagnant waters of sensualism. His death ten years later in 1748 was a non-event in that he merely passed from one state of inanimation to another. Here was an ignominious end to a life devoid of honour, courage and high purpose.

For some months he suffered overmuch from dropsy. The ailment took a serious turn when his son Ahmad was engaged in checking the advance of Ahmed Shah Abdali towards Delhi. He died before his successor reached the capital after scoring a victory over the Afghan invader near Thanesar.

*The 82-year-old Asaf Jah, Nizam-ul-Mulk, was the only Mughal noble to escape the wrath of Nadir Shah. He left for the Deccan soon after the Persian ruler's departure from Delhi. There he set up a semi-independent state despite the intra-family feuds among his sons.

On the other side of Nil-Ab, Nadir Shah was stabbed to death near Fatehbad eight years after his return from Delhi. His treasures were plundered and his women dishonoured. It is believed his eldest son, Mirza Raza Quli*, instigated the crime against his father. Did any despot ever escape the long arm of retribution? Unlike Babar, Akbar and Aurangzeb, Nadir was not a human phenomenon hard to analyse and understand. He was just a high-voltage highwayman. To understand him rightly does not require the intellect of an Abul Fazl or Khafi Khan. The savagery in him spoke for itself; it would be futile to explain it or subject it to minute analysis in terms either of primary or secondary traits of character. It is perhaps beyond the intellect of man to find real rationale in the acts of desecrator by maniacs who delight in the misery of others.

The end of Nadir's journey came in the summer of 1747, and what a journey and what an end! The few who saw him going the way of all flesh wondered if man would ever be the master of his own destiny. They closed up his eyes, drew a white cotton sheet over his body, and raised their hands in silent prayer. God is all, man nothing.

*Mirza Raza Quli was blinded at the orders of his father a year earlier. Nadir Shah suspected him of treachery to seize the throne while he was busy carrying military operations outside Persia.

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